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Places, Faces, and Other Familiar Things: The Cultural Experience of Telenovela Viewing among Latinos in the United States

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Introduction

Anyone who has ever watched Spanish-language television has seen telenovelas. As a staple of Spanish-language network programming, they air mornings, afternoons, and evenings. To watch them is a family affair; mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, aunts, uncles, grandfathers, and grandmothers gather before the television for the daily half-hour or hour segments, captivated by the characters, narratives, and scenery. Young and old alike find ones that beckon them to return the following day in search of what happens next. A pervasive, popular form of programming throughout Latin American countries, Mexicanos, Salvadoreños, Colombianos, and Brasileiros have grown up with telenovelas. In the United States, telenovelas may be viewed on Spanish-language channels transmitted via cable.

For many Latino viewers, the preference for telenovelas over other forms of episodic programming developed in their country of origin. Sustained by the culture and maintained by familial practices, telenovela viewing is often a taken-for-granted routine of everyday life. But how are those preferences affected when viewing takes place in other locales? In particular, for residents of the United States, are reasons for watching novelas—as those who watch them regularly affectionately call them—different from living abroad? If members of the Spanish-speaking audience have lived in the United States all their lives, are telenovelas watched for reasons other than entertainment?

As a small child, the first author of this article sat in the living room with her family watching the evening telenovelas. Her parents, recent immigrants from Guatemala and tired from another day of hard labor, enjoyed sitting on the couch with her and her sisters and following the saga of the latest novela, *Los Ricos Tambien Lloran* (The Rich Also Cry). How would Veronica Castro tell Antonio Capetio that she was the

mother who had abandoned him as a baby in the streets of Mexico City? Would he understand that she was not a bad mother but rather a victim of her family's shame in her unwanted pregnancy? Watching the tall, dark-skinned women onscreen for an indication of cultural similarities gave a hint to what she may look like when she grew up. At least they looked more like she did than the blond, fair-skinned women in English-language soap operas. She, her mother, and her sisters would then talk about the episode and speculate what would happen tomorrow. They all knew how it would end: problems solved, lovers reunited, long lost family members found, villains getting what they deserved. The enjoyment of watching came from the twists and detours the story took along the way. But the women in her family were not the only ones who enjoyed watching *Los Ricos*.

Los Ricos Tambien Lloran reached international popularity when it was shown not only throughout Latin America, but also in Europe, parts of Asia, the former Soviet Union, and the United States. *Los Ricos* is one of many telenovelas that have been broadcast in the United States. At the time of our research, over fifteen telenovelas were being shown in the Santa Barbara area by the local broadcast of the Spanish language networks Univision, Telemundo, Gems, and Galavision. Depending on the series and network, novelas are produced in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, or Venezuela, among others. Their prominence in Spanish-language programming in this country is similar to their popularity throughout Latin America; they are the jewel of Latin American television programming.

Although a great deal of attention has been devoted to the study of telenovelas within the countries in which they are produced (see, for example, Martin-Barbero, "Memory"; McAnany and LaPastina; Mattelart and Mattelart), far less is known about their status as a form of popular culture among those who view them in the United States. Our research on telenovelas explores how Latinos in the United States engage them as cultural products. Our specific aim is to understand why Latinos in the United States watch Spanish-language telenovelas.

* * *

Tanya calls her friend, Gabriela to tell her she will be coming to Tijuana to see a Tex-Mex musical band. Gabriela asks her how she was able to convince her mother to let her come such a long way and Tanya explains to her she has agreed to marry Uriel, who according to her mother, will guarantee her a happy life because he is a wealthy young man. What Tanya does not tell Gabriela or her mother is that the real reason she is going to Tijuana is to see Johnny, the

truck driver she met at her family's restaurant in Mexico City. Meanwhile back in Tijuana, Johnny is engaged in a fight with his wife of 14 years, Ana Maria, who has accused him of being distant and easily upset. Johnny has lost his truck and has been unable to drive to work and see Tanya, who lives in Mexico City. More importantly, Johnny realizes for the first time that all the trouble his family is having is because he has not been able to stop thinking about Tanya. He is in love with both women and can not decide whom he will be with.

Gabriela's mother interrupts the conversation between Gabriela and Tanya and angrily tells Gabriela the family does not have enough money to pay for the phone and will not be able to continue living a lavish style, especially now that Gabriela has broken the marriage engagement with Ricardo, the son of a very wealthy and prominent man. Her mother demands that Gabriela marry Ricardo, regardless of what she wants to do. Gabriela responds that Ricardo is too jealous and hot tempered and she is afraid he will hurt her because of his jealousy; besides, she does not love him and although he would be able to provide everything her family could ever want, she can not live with someone without love. Her mother dramatically explains one can live without love but not without money, so she must call Ricardo, apologize and hope that he will still want to marry her.

This is the Wednesday episode of the telenovela *Dos Mujeres, Un Camino* (Two Women, One Road) that was re-transmitted weekday mornings on Univision during the course of our study. When it was first televised in Mexico, where it was produced, it quickly became the most popular telenovela in Mexico's history, attracting women and men viewers alike (Duncan). Once it reached the largest Spanish-language network in the United States, Univision, it also gathered a significant audience in its 7 p.m. to 8 p.m. weeknight spot. The day its last episode aired, the flagship Univision station, KMEX Los Angeles, had one of its newscast reporters at the home of a family who had been watching it. The leading story of KMEX's 10 p.m. newscast was the story of the end of *Dos Mujeres* and fans' reaction to the unexpected ending.

Televisa is the Mexican television conglomerate that provides most of Univision's international programming, and the popularity of *Dos Mujeres* represents Televisa's initial attempt to use a telenovela narrative to appeal to the Latino community in the United States (Lopez). The other means of direct appeal was through the actor cast in one of the leading roles: Erik Estrada, of the 1970s U.S. TV series *CHiPS*. Estrada is a U.S. born actor of Puerto Rican descent who portrayed *Dos Mujeres*' main male protagonist, Johnny. To the viewing audience, Estrada represents the Latino who has lived in the United States most of his life, yet

continues to associate with the Latino community more than with U.S. culture. His character plays a L.A.-based truck driver whose route often takes him across the border into Mexico. These modifications of the more traditional telenovela to appeal to a common experience of the U.S. Latino audience is a phenomenon that is just now emerging. As one leading scholar of Latino narratives observes:

The explicit representation of the border crossing scenario and the eventual blurring and disappearance of the border itself within the melodramatic work of the serial transforms it into another “lived” space consequent to those north and south of the border that unmarks the limits of official geography. (Lopez 268)

Telenovelas as a Narrative Form

Telenovelas are the most popular type of episodic television programming throughout Latin America (Tufte), and the Spanish-language networks that air in the United States also center their programming on telenovelas. Indeed, when Telemundo, Univision’s primary competitor in the United States for the Spanish speaking audience, dropped telenovelas from its 1998-99 prime-time schedule, its ratings plummeted, and they subsequently returned to the novela format for evening programming (Baxter, “Ailing”).

The telenovela as a narrative form can be traced to the serial newspaper stories of France, but its introduction to the Latin American audience as a form of viewing is more directly linked to the emergence of the television industry in the United States (Martin-Barbero, “Memory”). That industry was launched in the late 1940s, and by the early 1950s, soap operas were a cornerstone of U.S. daytime television programming. American soaps had their origin in radio serials of the 1930s, which developed a system of selling transmission time to sponsors, who, in turn, produced programming as a platform for commercials (Brown). Under this arrangement, sponsors were instrumental in the selection of programming content. By 1939, Proctor and Gamble sponsored 22 serials, thus the name “soap operas.”

U.S. soap operas were originally targeted to housewives, who tended to be the adult family member who was home during the day. The format of soap operas, which consists of episodic, open-ended narratives and plots based on relationships between characters, was conducive to the structure of housework and the content of domestic concerns. Today, soap operas continue to be a gendered, open narrative (Harrington and Bielby) and are still broadcast during the day, despite the dramatic increase in women working outside the home.

The evolution of the telenovela as a format different from the American soap opera can be traced mainly to the development of television in Mexico. Similar to the introduction of soap operas in the United States, telenovelas emerged from the desire by U.S. enterprises to reach consumers within Latin America (Martin-Barbero, "Memory"). However, there were several important developments that turned soap operas as an imported form into a distinctly different cultural product. First, Telesistema Mexico (which later become Televisa) shifted control of production and distribution from the hands of sponsors to those of producers, making sponsors buy advertising spots instead of programming time. Second, the producers considered making telenovelas of high literary quality, inviting prominent writers to become part of developing the text, and thus giving plots a Mexican cultural element. Those intentions, however, were soon forgotten, and were replaced, instead, with writing that fulfilled the goal of providing a "good show that could reach the most number of families and create a source of funding for the commercial television enterprises" (Le Gallo). Third, since the primary objective of the telenovela was to reach a large audience, they became prime-time entertainment, with narratives and a format with widespread appeal. Consequently, telenovelas evolved into less gendered texts than U.S. soap operas. Their format was modified from never-ending stories to narrative closure, and melodrama became of paramount importance as a property of the form (Lopez).

Martin-Barbero's extensive research on Latin American television identifies melodrama as the central reason for the appeal of telenovelas. Melodrama, he argues, contemporizes the oral traditions of the continent that have existed since pre-Columbian times, and its presence within telenovelas "makes it possible for the urban masses to appropriate modernity without abandoning their oral culture" (see White). This, however, does not make Latin American telenovelas a homogenous form. Distinct differences exist from country to country in the use of the melodramatic. Mexican telenovelas are the most dramatic—a characteristic that is also present in its cinema—while Brazilian telenovelas use melodrama to portray the "realism of the society instead of the individual" (Martin-Barbero, *Communication*). In short, the success and popularity of telenovelas throughout Latin America is due in large part to reliance upon a narrative form that deeply articulates the cultural imagination of the continent (Martin-Barbero, *Communication*). Consequently, telenovelas are viewed throughout Latin America and other parts of the globe as a cultural product that is distinct to the region.

In the 1980s, as a result of wide acceptance of the telenovela throughout Latin America, Europe, and Asia, novelas became the

number one cultural export of Latin America. During that period, telenovela sales represented seventy percent of the total hours of exported programming (Rogers and Antola).¹ In fact, telenovela exportation by Latin American countries to other locations in the region was so successful that it appreciably decreased importation of U.S. programming into that part of the globe. As a result, the largest television networks in Latin America—TV Globo of Brazil and Televisa of Mexico—achieved tremendous financial success.

In sum, although telenovelas evolved from the U.S. genre of soap operas, they rapidly developed characteristics that made them culturally specific. Their reliance upon melodrama was a key factor in their evolution from U.S. soap opera conventions and in their wide acceptance by the Latin American public. Finally, as more than just vehicles of commerce, telenovelas became ideological products that carried within them important dimensions of the region's culture. Having attained recognized status in the world market of exported television, for those living outside the region they serve as cultural texts that are eagerly read to re-experience that which is familiar.

Spanish-Language Television in the United States

The flow of television from Latin America into the United States originates primarily from Mexico via Univision, although since 1990 Colombia and Argentina have begun to make gains following the emergence of a second Spanish-language network, Telemundo.² The success of Spanish-language television in the United States has been referred to as “reverse media imperialism” because of Mexico's success in penetrating the mass media audience of so dominant a country (Rogers and Antola; Gutierrez and Schement; Antola and Rogers). Existing scholarship on Spanish-language networks has focused primarily on Univision (Gutierrez and Schement; Walker; A. Gonzalez; Gutierrez), and to a lesser extent on Telemundo. Unfortunately, most of the scholarly work on Univision was done in the 1980s, and in the last decade the network has undergone tremendous production, managerial, and ownership changes. Even so, that work provides important information on the formation of a Spanish-language television enterprise that targets the Latino community in the United States.

In general, the rise of Univision as the largest Spanish-language network in the United States is mostly due to the neglect of Spanish-speaking communities by the major American broadcast networks. Efforts by the U.S. networks to reach Latino audiences have been modest in scale and mostly unsuccessful (Fisher; Baxter, “KCBS”). Mexican media mogul Emilio Azcarraga initially offered American networks Mexican

programming for the U.S. Spanish-speaking population, but upon being rejected, he began building a Spanish network with close connections to Mexico's Televisa, which he owned (Gutierrez and Schement). Since then, Univision has remained the American off-shoot of Televisa, which explains why Univision imports most of its programming from that source.

Telemundo has made small gains into Univision's enormous market share—which in the 1980s was close to 90% of the Latino audience (Antola and Rogers) and now reaches 92% (Jensen and Baxter)—with a variety of programming imported from South America, the Caribbean, and Spanish-dubbed American shows. But Telemundo's difficulty in gaining access to Televisa's telenovelas has been its largest impediment to increasing its market share. Until 1998, Telemundo relied upon the strategy of importing telenovelas produced by other Mexican studios, primarily the relatively new Mexican network TV Azteca, as well as producing its own programming with U.S. Latino producers and actors (Shermach, McClellan, Consoli). Although both networks have moved toward the production of more original programming, Univision still relies heavily on the telenovela to attract a large audience, as does Telemundo, once again, following a failed attempt to diversify its prime-time programming (Baxter, "Ailing"). Telenovelas made in the United States are not a viable source of programming, since it is unlikely that they would be seen outside the United States, especially with Televisa's quasi-monopoly in the industry. Whether the Spanish-language networks will emerge as exporters of a wider range of cultural products that are distinctively Latino remains to be seen. In the meantime, they continue to broadcast telenovelas that serve as important cultural texts for consumption by the growing Latino audience in the United States.

How are telenovelas received by audiences in the United States? Do they transcend the commercial medium in which they are broadcast? How successfully do they import another culture into the United States? Jorge Gonzalez divides scholarly research on telenovelas into five dominant analytical themes: contents and the effects upon the viewer; narrative structures; modes of ideological manipulation; uses and gratifications; and, pro-development telenovelas. Although his categorical approach serves a useful purpose, other theoretical frameworks are necessary to understand the process by which telenovelas are incorporated into U.S. Latino viewing practices. That research includes understanding the factors which address telenovela reception as cultural products by members of Latino communities in the United States.

Raymond Williams explains that residual ideology surfaces when a dominant culture "neglects, undervalues, opposes, represses, or even

cannot recognize” meanings and values that are significant to a part of society. When the major U.S. television networks neglected the Spanish-speaking audience, a vacuum was created which opened up opportunities for alternative programming. As Joseph Straubhaar and Gloria Viscasillas note, “when local or national culture is not available on certain types of television, audiences tend to prefer cultural products which are as close to their own culture as possible.” Although the use of mass media can facilitate acculturation, in the case of viewership of telenovelas in the United States, it is more important to know whether the reverse applies. That is, how does watching ethnic media affect the process of accommodation to the dominant culture? While results are not conclusive, one study found that among Latinos, “television viewing is tied to several uses, most importantly, finding ways to maintain one’s cultural heritage and habits. Those included keeping up with names, places, or music of the past, maintaining contact with traditions, and generating common experiences to talk about with other ethnic group members” (Faber, O’Guinn, and Meyer).

Television consumption in the United States has been studied by many for its effects on the audience, gratifications derived from it, and the subcultures that evolve around particular shows such as *Star Trek* and *X-Files*, or genres such as soap operas (Harrington and Bielby). Spanish-language programming in the United States has yet to be granted the same attention. The research reported here studied telenovelas as the most popular form of episodic television programming among Latinos in the United States, and it explores the reasons why Latinos view them. It also asks how the viewing of telenovelas contributes to the construction and reproduction of Latino culture through mass media, and whether telenovelas serve a means of resisting the surrounding dominant American culture.

Findings

Recreating Latino Culture through Telenovelas

The data for this project came from interviews with 13 women who declared they were currently watching or had watched telenovelas in the past.³ In general, telenovelas allowed them to feel significantly closer to their Latin American culture and heritage⁴ than when they viewed American programming.⁵

Seeing the Familiar

For the women we interviewed, watching telenovelas provided a way for them to remember Latin America, often in great detail. The extent of their recognition depended upon the degree of their connection

with the region. That is, if they had been born and lived a part of their lives in Latin America, they were able to find more cultural elements within the textual and visual aspects of novelas than if they had been born in the United States and their primary connection to Latin America was through their parents. One exception was a participant who became independently “hooked” on novelas after she studied in Mexico. Upon her return to the United States, she continued to watch novelas in order to maintain a connection to Mexico.

Viewing novelas was pivotal to helping these women maintain Latin American traditions. Every one of them mentioned that they practiced traditions in the United States that were routinely honored in Latin America and which were rarely portrayed in English-language television. For example, several respondents mentioned the centrality of religion to Latin American culture and how prominent its inclusion was in telenovelas. From images of La Virgen de Guadalupe hanging on the wall of telenovela sets to the enactment of religious holidays as part of the narrative, the inclusion of religious practices and customs helped these viewers retain traditions they cherished but no longer saw in the mainstream media surrounding them.

The visual representation of Latin American styles (even hairstyles, as one woman mentioned), locales, and architecture in telenovelas was equally important to the women we interviewed. Of paramount importance was that those settings allowed them to visualize locations for enactment of familiar traditions, diminishing the sense that practicing their culture was “different” than the mainstream. Many of the women also felt that their familiarity with representations of places from different countries sustained their tie to Latin America. For some, the ultimate connection to Latin America was to live there, however impractical that may have been in actuality. Short of that, many watched the novelas so that they could see locations that they had visited, lived in, or heard or read about. Their familiarity with the scenery in episodes filmed on location was one of the main findings of our study. For example, several took note of parks that they had never visited in person but were able to identify as “authentically” Mexican, Colombian, or Venezuelan. Based on various visual cues, these women could also identify novelas produced in different countries, indicating that they were not only familiar with characteristics of their own country but also with those elsewhere in the region.

Hearing the Language

All of our participants were fluent in English, and the concept of language quickly became a resonating theme among the women we inter-

viewed. They conducted their daily activities primarily in an English-speaking environment, using English at work and at school, and with friends, colleagues, professors, roommates, and family members. Because they were all either college graduates or college students, it can safely be assumed that their English language fluency was equivalent to that of a native speaker. Yet, these women were also Spanish language speakers. Most consider Spanish their mother tongue—their native language—even though most now are predominantly English speakers. It is significant then, that most reported watching Spanish-language television more frequently than English programming. Moreover, most respondents distinctly chose to view novelas over other types of Spanish-language programming such as variety shows, comedy shows, and the news. Furthermore, each of the respondents declared that they preferred to watch telenovelas instead of U.S. soap operas, although they had viewed them in the past. The most common reason given for viewing novelas was the desire to maintain Spanish-language fluency or even re-learning the language after it had been forgotten.

Several of the respondents stated they had “lost” their Spanish after not using it for a while. Even at the time of the interview they felt that their Spanish was perhaps “rusty” and preferred to conduct the interview in English. All of the women stated that if they knew someone who wanted to learn Spanish, they would recommend watching novelas as a way of learning the language in a less formal form than the “Castellano”⁶ they may learn through classroom lessons.

A majority of our participants were college students who had left home to live close to campus. This transition from home to independent living caused their telenovela viewing to decrease significantly. Living at the dorms or with roommates was not as conducive to watching Spanish-language television, especially if housemates were not Spanish speakers. Many of the respondents experienced what they described as “culture shock” when they arrived at college, where the homogeneity of home and community was replaced with a predominately white, English-speaking environment. For example, many of the women who lived in a dorm found it difficult to continue watching novelas in the television lounge because other students also wanted to watch television, English-language television, especially during the prime-time hours of 8 to 11 p.m.

Although Latin America has been presented here as a homogenous region, many of the respondents found differences between novelas from different countries. The way the characters spoke, the slang they used, and the accent of the country was readily recognized by all the participants. One respondent, who did speak Spanish on a regular basis, or

more specifically Spanglish—a mixture of English and Spanish—said she liked to learn the slang from Mexico and use it among her family and friends. Many liked watching novelas from different countries, others preferred to watch only Mexican novelas, but all thought that language was an important part as to why they watched them. One woman saw the language as a metaphor for Latin America, and she insisted that even in countries where Spanish is the dominant language, it must not be assumed that their cultures are the same.

In sum, cultural elements such as religion, scenery, and language in telenovelas all helped the women feel like they had a piece of Latin America in their own homes. Viewing telenovelas was not a passive experience, but rather an active form of engaging with a text and culturally interpreting it to fulfill the need of feeling closer to their heritage. The language of the novelas served to maintain participants' fluency in Spanish if other opportunities were not present and to bring familiarity with the slang used in Latin American countries.

Gender Differences in the Viewing and Interpretation of Novelas

Progress towards gender equality has been slower in Latin America than in the United States. Culture and religion have kept men and women's roles more traditional and differentiated than in most other industrially developed regions of the globe. Although traditional gender roles have been carried by Latinos when immigrating to the United States, the women's movement of the 1960s as well as economic exigencies have had some influence on actual familial practices (see for, example, Hondagneu-Sotelo). Even so, the portrayal of men and women in telenovelas continues to draw heavily upon some of the more traditional gender practices found in Latin America.

Telenovelas have been studied only from the perspective of female audiences (Le Gallo). This emphasis on the female telenovela audience ignores the fact that male viewers must exist for telenovelas to have attained such a high level of success, not only in Latin America but throughout the world.⁷ From personal experience, we knew that men watched novelas as much as women did. Growing up, the first author experienced firsthand the fact that her father, uncles, and even American brothers-in-law sat on the couch next to the women in her family to view telenovelas. However, when it came time to find informants for our project, it became clear that it was going to be difficult to find men who would admit to watching novelas.⁸ Our search of telenovela bulletin boards on the Internet also showed that a significant number of men were posting on those boards, again, suggesting that novelas were of interest to men and women alike. Several women in our study supported

this conclusion by recounting how fathers, grandfathers, uncles, and brothers watched novelas with them. Moreover, the predominance of telenovelas in episodic Latin American programming left little room for alternative forms of programming for men to watch. Men had to be watching novelas, even if they did not want to admit it to a sociologist.

Wanting More Than the Mujer Sufrida

In contrast to the men we contacted for interviews, our women respondents were forthcoming about what they enjoyed watching. Most tended to prefer novelas which have a strong female character, dismissing the *mujer sufrida*, or “suffering woman,” character as unacceptable to them. They identified more with the women characters who challenge the traditional female roles of dependency, long suffering, and submission. Asked to identify their all-time favorite novela, many indicated a liking for dramas that portrayed female protagonists in non-traditional roles. Such was the case for the drama *La Dueña*. In Spanish, the word is usually “el dueño,” gendered masculine. For that series, the term was resignified in the feminine as “la dueña,” as the narrative was one in which the female protagonist became the owner of her own life. The plot is centered on a single woman who is wealthy and owns a ranch. On her wedding day, her fiancée abandons her at the altar, and “her sweet personality turns cold and authoritative” (based upon the network’s plot summary). Although not all female characters in novelas are portrayed as sweet and innocent—the antagonists are just the opposite—seldom is the protagonist the one with a “challenging personality.” One of our respondents argued that she liked *La Dueña* because the protagonist did not have men telling her what to do.

Because long-standing gender practices are changing in Latin American culture—women can now be more assertive—the women we interviewed, nearly all of them feminists themselves, wanted to see similar changes in telenovela narratives. Preferring serials with culturally transgressive female protagonists and non-traditional plots is one manifestation of their desire for social change. Yet, these women remain able to watch the more traditional serials preferred by their mothers and grandmothers by generating alternative readings to the culturally-bound women in the novelas. In short, our respondents affirm that watching novelas is hardly a passive reading and tacit acceptance of traditional narratives.

It’s All in the Family

Several of our respondents mentioned the representation of the family as one of the main reasons they watched telenovelas. They partic-

ularly enjoyed seeing how the extended family was integral to the nuclear family of the main characters. As one respondent observed, "it is o.k. if the older son is still living at home; he is not expected to move out and be on his own like in the singles' top sitcom *Friends*." But, the concept of the family was appreciated by our respondents not only for its value to the narrative. For most, it was integral to their viewing practices. Most respondents offered recollections of watching novelas as children, along with their parents and siblings. One participant recounted how visits by extended family always culminated with everyone sitting in front of the television to watch that evening's episode of whatever novela was on at the time. Only upon the conclusion of the episode did the family fiesta end.

The family also played a key role in the initiation of our respondents to novela viewership. This was demonstrated by the expressed desire on the part of several of the respondents to pass their tradition of telenovela viewing to their children. Many of them found that watching novelas created numerous opportunities for family discussions. Others recounted how telenovela viewing created a special bond between themselves and their mothers, who, as mother and daughter, would lie in bed together watching and experiencing a story that was enjoyable to both. These women looked forward to sharing those viewing habits with their own daughters. Since most of the participants did not live at home at the time they were interviewed, all looked forward to once again being with their families in order to share the viewing experience. Watching novelas as a family was so embedded in the lives of our respondents that one, a Chicana, argued that part of being Latino *meant* watching novelas. "Everyone watches or has watched them," she said, arguing that "it's part of the culture; if you are Mexican you have watched them, there is no way you can live with your family and never see them, it's just part of the culture."

Conclusion

Our findings show that telenovelas assist Latinos who reside in the United States in recreating and maintaining a strong cultural bond to Latin America. Specifically, by seeing the portrayal of key cultural elements in the narrative, including religion and setting, and hearing the language, Latin American culture was sustained for them in crucial ways. We also found that there are differences in the way men and women admit publicly to their viewing practices. Despite that, for all our respondents the participation of the entire family in watching telenovelas was a taken-for-granted aspect of their viewing.

The women comprising our study drew much more than entertainment from watching telenovelas. For them, the viewing process rein-

forced, legitimated, and normalized their experience with their cultural heritage, which more often than not is ignored by English-language media. Novelas provided a place where they could find depictions of their culture portrayed as part of normal, everyday life. In short, the viewing of novelas assisted the U.S. Latino community in maintaining and defining themselves as a culture that is unique within the larger dominant American culture.

Our study lends a voice to a previously ignored population, novela viewers in the United States. However, because of the scope of the project and the limited focus of the sample, more research needs to be done to gain a better understanding of the role of Spanish-language programming in the United States. As the Latino population continues to grow into the twenty-first century and the television industry expands with it, it is increasingly important to study the reasons why people continue to view ethnic media, and the gratifications they receive from it.

Finally, the telenovela is a forum in which numerous socio-cultural issues can be studied. In the realm of popular culture, it stands as the dominant type of episodic programming in Spanish-language television. As such it cannot be ignored, for it is a product that is consumed by millions of people around the world, and it gives American programming a solid form of competition in its exportation of television. Regarding the relationship of the telenovela to cultural processes, in many ways our study only touched the surface. The portrayal of race and class is one of many aspects of telenovela viewing that remains unexamined. Questions such as why the European aesthetic is so prominent among the female characters and what those who watch them think about this can only be answered by embarking on more research on the subject.

Notes

¹Foreign advertisers recognize that national or regional programs are better advertising vehicles, and thus they provide more funding for networks that disseminate such programming (Rogers and Antola, Straubhaar and Viscasillas, LeGallo).

²Other cable networks have also emerged, such as Gems, which is seen throughout Latin America, and Galavision, the cable network for Univision/Televisa.

³In total, 14 people were interviewed, 13 women and one man. Four of the 14 interviews were conducted in Spanish, the remainder in English. Because only one man was interviewed, the results reported here focus only upon the female interviewees. All the women were in college or college educated, and/or

pursuing an advanced degree; one was a first year student at a community college, four were undergraduate students at UC, Santa Barbara, three were graduate students, one had a master's degree in international relations, and one had a Ph.D. in English and was teaching at a university. They ranged in age from 18 to 38 years old. They were mostly from working-class families and were either first- or second-generation immigrants. The data were gathered through in-depth, non-structured interviews. Although there was a focus—why they view telenovelas—each interviewee directed the interview to give the information she deemed important. The interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes; only one interview lasted more than one hour, lasting close to two hours. The respondents were found through postings on telenovela bulletin boards on the Internet, through snowball sampling, and through an electronic mailing list for the Latin American and Iberian Studies program at UC, Santa Barbara. The majority contacted us about this project after having read a posting asking for people who watched novelas. The initial contact was through electronic mail, followed by a telephone call to set up an interview. The initial contact included information about the project general enough as to not bias potential responses during the interview process. If potential interviewees were still interested in participating, an interview time and place was arranged. The interview process can best be described as “casual conversation” after the initial formalities of introductions and explanations. Most of the interviews were conducted in person on the university campus. Three interviews were conducted by phone due to difficulty in reaching the interviewees' residences. All but one of the interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interviews were mostly conducted in English, although Spanish phrases were used by both the interviewee and the interviewer throughout the conversation. Before the interview was completed, the interviewees were given an opportunity to tell the interviewer any relevant information about telenovelas that they felt was important to be included as part of the interview but had not yet been discussed. They were also given the opportunity to ask the interviewer any questions regarding the project or subject matter.

⁴To consider that two entire continents and part of a third constitute one single “Latin American culture” misrepresents the variation within that region of the globe. However, our participants preferred use of that term in speaking of their backgrounds and heritage. In our use of the term, where possible, we acknowledge the differences and similarities among the 26 countries that comprise region, recognizing that even within countries there will be cultural differences based on race and class.

⁵In order to be more aware of the subject matter, certain steps were taken to familiarize ourselves with the genre. First, we viewed the most widely watched telenovelas from each of the two major Spanish-language networks, Univision and Telemundo. We were primarily interested in the telenovelas being shown in the evening hours, from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m., the novelas with the largest audiences.

During the data gathering phase of our project (January to April 1997) there were seven shows broadcast during those hours, three which were weeknight shows and one which was shown only on Sunday evenings (on Univision). We initially assumed that each network would have one telenovela that was particularly popular, which was the one we planned to focus on and the one we were more likely to find viewers for. This assumption proved incorrect since most of our interviewees referred to previously shown novelas and not the shows then on the air. Internet web sites were used to obtain plot information on previously aired shows; also, we received plot summaries from KMEX Los Angeles for some of the novelas mentioned by the interviewees.

⁶Although most countries in Latin America use Spanish as the dominant language, there exists different variations within countries and regions. Castellano is the Spanish that the Spaniards brought at the time of the conquest. Many argue that this is the correct form of Spanish, and it is usually the one taught as part of learning Spanish in a language curriculum. Also, there are countries which have more than one language spoken within their borders. For example, Belize has Spanish, Creole, English, and different Maya dialects spoken within its borders.

⁷See Harrington and Bielby for a discussion of men's representation among viewers and dedicated fans of U.S. soaps.

⁸Initially, we had one male interviewee; he and his wife were the first people we interviewed. We mention this because the interview was the only conversation we had with a male novela viewer. As our sample began to grow and evolve into mostly female college students, we stopped searching for men to include in the study. However, after analysis of our interview transcripts, we concluded that men were most definitely present in the interviewee's accounts of their novela viewing.

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