

Telenovelas: the televisual construction of a Latino Identity

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Prepared for delivery at the 2009 Congress of the Latin American Studies Association,
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil June 11-14, 2009.

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Telenovelas or televised episodic melodramatic narratives comprise the most disseminated and exported product of Latin America's cultural industry. Although the production and distribution of telenovelas are dominated by three media conglomerates such as *O Globo* in Brazil, *Televisa* in México, and *Venevisión* in Venezuela, there are secondary players found in Argentina and Colombia that provide the three main producers of television fiction with technical, artistic, and economic support. This corporate and artistic collaboration has allowed Latin American telenovelas to be a truly integrated transnational product that not only dominates within the region, but it has been successfully placed within other world television markets. The successful placement of telenovelas in global markets have ultimately questioned hegemonic forms of televisual domination by the 'first-world' audio visual industry, thereby creating new centers of power. As noted by Mazziotti and Martín-Barbero, Latin American programming have challenged not only American programming north and south of the U.S., but it has also disputed the centrality of English language programming worldwide. However it is my intention within this presentation to complicate this dynamic presented by Mazziotti and Martín-Barbero since the hegemony of Latin American programming in the continent is being challenged by Telemundo, a U.S. Spanish language network. Telemundo is the second largest of U.S. Spanish language media conglomerates and it is a subsidiary of the NBC network. Within the last 10 years, Telemundo has consistently moved away from airing programming produced in Latin America to producing original programming made in the U.S. for its Spanish speaking division. The company's relative success questions the dominance of Latin American produced serials airing in the U.S., while also questioning the relevance of importing programming deemed representative for a Latino population that has been living in the U.S. for various generations. Telemundo reassesses this programming practice by attempting to tap into an underrepresented segment of the audience, by claiming Telemundo is a Latino network serving the needs of its Latino U.S. born community. Therefore in this presentation I propose exposing how the need to create and maintain new audiences, has constructed the term Latino through the network's prime-time telenovelas. For Telemundo, Latinidad must be constructed by creating modern urban characters that reject and defy heteronormative and patriarchal values. Creating such televisual Latino identity serves Telemundo a dual purpose. First, it allows the network to attract an urban Latino viewer, a viewer generally ignored by Univisión, the leading competitor in U.S. Spanish language television, and secondly Telemundo's treatment of gendered roles, embodied by their Latino/a characters, create and situate programming as ideologically different from Univisión, whose mostly imported telenovelas reproduce traditional views and stereotypes emanating from Latin America, sometimes conflicting with the reality of Latinos in the U.S. This dual shift allows Telemundo to attract Latino viewers generally ignored by mainstream media. As I will argue, this Latino identity is constructed on U.S. Spanish language television through the reformulation of the melodramatic genre. It is my contention to define melodrama in relation to the telenovela as a genre that can suspend patriarchal domination by delaying the deployment of a heteronormative value system, encapsulated in the traditional marriage scene occurring in the final episode. Although the convention of the marriage scene seems to impose a traditional end, where the woman submits to her husband, the serialized nature of the telenovela diminishes the importance of its finale. Simply through the sheer number of episodes which precede

narratives closure, it makes it difficult to argue on behalf of the traditional ideological underpinnings of the concluding episode.

Evinced in the case studies on telenovelas such as *La Venganza* and *El Rostro de Analía*, I find the suspension of patriarchy by the stories' ability to situate all of its leading male characters as flawed and in need of elimination. It is the weaknesses of these male characters that allow the leading heroine to unleash herself from the constraints placed on femininity as defined by patriarchy, laying to rest valuing women for their delicacy, their maternal instinct, their abnegated view of life, their woman-in-waiting syndrome, and the negation of female sexuality. Instead, in these telenovelas through the serialization of Latina characters, the passive nature of femininity is inverted. It is in the episodic nature of the telenovela which allows for the gradual reversal of gendered roles. Once the telenovela develops its male characters as flawed, the ensuing episodes will narrate women's ascension into spheres traditionally reserved for men. In addition, besides restructuring the melodramatic genre by inverting gender roles, U.S. Spanish media will use language policies to define and maintain its Latino audience. I am particularly interested in the *dual-language* of telenovelas and its significance within media. By *dual-language* I am referring to two distinct aspects. First, on to the role Spanish language television has had in binding and manipulating Latino identity in relation to language use: Spanish language networks have attempted to secure an audience by interpellating and defining Latinidad, on the ability of its audiences to maintain and perpetuate the Spanish language. By having a clearly defined audience which can be presented to ad agencies as possible consumers, Spanish language television secured its position as producer of cultural goods backed by marketing revenue. Secondly, Latinos will be constructed as I argued previously through the language of melodrama-telenovela.

This research is informed by the major changes taking place on U.S. Spanish language networks during the end of the 1990s. The 1998-99 season was a turning point due to the consolidation of the Univisión network and the purchase of Telemundo by the Sony Corporation. US media industry leaders began looking at Spanish language television since ratings and market shares indices evinced a shrinking audience in Anglophone broadcast networks. Audiences were turning to cable for its offer of a more diversified prime-time line up. However this trend did not hold up for Univisión and Telemundo. Univisión was 'deemed the fastest growing broadcaster among 18-34-year-olds' (Levine 1999). This key demographic group is highly desirable during February and May sweeps periods, since it is their numbers that count for setting advertising rates for the rest of the year, and the 'big-four' US networks were losing out in comparison to Univisión. Telemundo did not want to be left out of the Latino-television success and decided to challenge the dominance of Univisión. In order to do so, Telemundo took unusual steps in an attempt to gain a portion of the Latino audience. During the 1998-99 season, Telemundo dropped all of its telenovela line-up, and replaced it with 'original' programming targeting young bilingual-Latino audiences. Telemundo executives strongly believed that their new and original non-telenovela programming would attract an often ignored and underrepresented group, since representation of English speaking Latinos on U.S. television is also minimal (Levine). Telemundo's move to incorporate a traditionally ignored audience failed¹ in terms of ratings, forcing them to return to telenovelas during their prime-time lineup. However, in order to differentiate itself from the competition, the company decided to implement a different model of telenovela production.

1. Productions must be produced in the U.S. to foster and cater to U.S Latinos.
2. U.S. productions will employ a 'standardized' Mexican accent regardless of

- the actor's origin.
3. The leading actors will be played only by highly recognized Latin American actors.
 4. The supporting cast, particularly teenage and or young adult actors, will be played by local U.S born or raised Latinos, to promote the advancement of Latino actors in the U.S.
 5. Secondary story lines will reflect the Latino immigrant experience.

Telemundo's current model sparks conflicting views, since the hierarchies of power grant Latin Americans prominence over U.S. Latinos. Nevertheless, Telemundo is able to differentiate itself from Univision even if masking Latin Americans as Latinos. However Telemundo's greatest departure from Univision occurs through its rewriting of the melodramatic genre, a genre which evinces its flexibility in its ability to tell a story episodically. Although a telenovela tells a love story which culminates in the triumph of heterosexual love through the endorsement of marriage and the reestablishment of patriarchal rule, the episodic serialization of the story's narrative undermines the ideological norms of the formula without affecting the exigencies of the formula and its commodification as a telenovela.

Here we have another distinction initiated by Telemundo where Latino is differentiated from the Latin American, by situating Latino characters as more modern, urban, and progressive in comparison to the representation of Latin Americans on Univisión. Yet, Telemundo's programming is produced, directed, written, and performed by an *imported* Latin American team. These thematic and representational shifts ultimately define and construct a Latino identity and it will be analyzed here through content analysis of *La Venganza*, *Tierra de Pasiones*, and *El Rostro de Analía*. The first two telenovelas share striking plot commonalities that undo patriarchal models. *La venganza* begins its narrative by killing Helena, a woman who suffers in silence her husband's abuse and affairs. Helena fears divorcing her husband will jeopardize her family and her position as a wealthy housewife. Her maintenance of social and economic norms ends through her death, but she is able to return to life to reassess her priorities and end her husband's dominion over the family. Although she is physically the same, Helena has been reincarnated with the soul of a another woman who also died the same day during a boxing match. Helena's return to life as a boxer will literally allow her to fight her way through life by reordering social norms. Similarly, *El rostro de Analía* also narrates the supposed death of Isabel, a suffering wife who is forced to live with a cheating husband and a family that does not allow her to express how she feels. Everyone believes she died, but in reality there is a doctor at the scene of the accident who saves her and implants her with a new face and body, a technique he had just developed. Yet this new face and body belonged to Analía, an undercover police woman who was posing as a stripper in order to bring a violent drug lord to justice. Everyone forces and expects Isabel to act like Analía. By taking on Analía's physical and emotional characteristics, which are the complete opposite of the model of domesticity which Isabel portrayed, it will allow Isabel to return to her home to change the family dynamics which oppressed her.

Tierra de pasiones does not continue the return to life plot of the first two telenovelas, but it does question gendered rules by constructing Latina female characters who defy their social circle mostly composed by men who attempt to rule their lives. This telenovela centers on Valeria San Román, a headstrong thirty something woman, who along with her father Don Chema, operate one of the most successful vineyards in Miami. Although father and daughter work together, they do not get along, and they are

constantly vying for control of the family business. Don Chema continues to torment his daughter Valeria by secretly paying one of his workers to romance and marry her. So that, once married, Valeria will forget about the family business. Here marriage is not presented as the possibility of female fulfillment, but as an institution which is flawed due to men's greed. Marriage as defined by the patriarch of the family is seen as an institution created by men to silence women. However, the day before the wedding, Valeria overhears her fiancé and father commenting and laughing how they were able to dupe Valeria. She decides to play along until the ceremony. When the priest asks if she will accept Ricardo as her husband, she pushes him aside and ridicules him in front of everyone by revealing the plan. She tells Ricardo, if he ever comes near her, she will kill him; and she almost does on two occasions. A few days later, he confronts her one more time and she beats him with a very thick log, leaving him unconscious for a couple of days. Ricardo vows for revenge, but he is never successful. Whenever Valeria disagrees with other characters, she resorts to physical violence, either attacking them with an object or with her fists. This behavior grants her the title of *marimacho*. Valeria even has a theme song that plays every time she hits someone which begins with the lines "me dicen la marimacho..." When this song plays, Valeria looks to the camera and smiles, acknowledging the title. It's this acknowledgement of transgressive feminine models that permit Valeria to ward off her controlling father and her manipulative fiancé.

Besides redefining gender roles and expectation, these telenovela will manipulate space and images in an attempt to define a space for a Latino subject. Latino identity in these three telenovelas is constructed by not privileging a specific local geographic location, but rather by establishing an identity based on country affiliation. By subscribing Latino identity as a national and not a regional affiliation, the term does not reflect differences between Latinos living in the east or the west coast, which can be seen as problematic since the experiences and backgrounds of Latinos living in various locations can be quite different. What defines their Latinidad is their Spanish language heritage and that they live north of the Rio Grande. This lack of specificity on local location-geography creates a distorted view of Latino experiences. For example *Tierra de Pasiones* is set in tropical Miami, and there are many exterior shots of South Beach and the typical Miami tourist locations. Yet all the characters work for a local vineyard (not a Florida industry), and when exterior shots are portrayed, most of the scenes take place in California's wine country region. In a sense the meshing of these two opposite coasts make sense within the logic of Telemundo's definition of *Latino*, which does not favor specificity in its location but its general experience of living in the United States. Also this lack of local specificity allows Telemundo not to ignore or signal out a particular kind of Latino. Telemundo's deployment of Latino as lacking any regional specificity, evinces a clear example of hegemonic tropicalization. Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman (1997) deploy the term hegemonic tropicalization in order to show that tropicalization tropes particular spaces-identities, in this case Latinos, with a set of traits and characteristics that are formulated from a privileged position, such as from the First World, or in this case from global U.S. networks. These characteristics are constructed as to serve and justify the needs of cultural producers. In a sense, the need of Telemundo to secure an audience base minimizes differences among Latinos that can occur due to geographic location. Therefore Telemundo tropicalizes Latino as a subject who inhabits U.S. territory and that speaks Spanish.

Telemundo's shift to Spanish as a defining trait of a Latino audience causes the network to employ an older language model developed in the 60s. Spanish-Language

television, since its inception made it very clear that their survival would be precisely through the use of Spanish language since they would attract the growing US immigrant population, which consistently renews itself through its constant flow of immigrants. The early networks, such as the now defunct S-I-N network and Telemundo pre NBC backing, envisioned their maintenance in the U.S. market not by providing programming that could compete against Anglophone programming, but through providing alternative programming that would fill the need of a population to stay in contact with a culture left behind through migration. This idea of a distinct language, the employment of an almost ‘generic’ Spanish would form part of the name behind Univisión: one vision and one language-Spanish, and this would form part of their early promotional ads for the network. As I argue, this notion of a *generic* Spanish is highly problematic since there is no such thing. For Univisión the standard stands in for a Mexican inflected variety, and this is logical since demographically Mexicans form the largest Spanish speaking population in the U.S. Secondly Televisa, Mexico’s largest media conglomerate was a major shareholder in Univisión. This language policy created in the 1960 cemented itself into the viewers and Telemundo’s rejection caused major reactions in its audiences. For example, the biggest complaint regarding a show like *Solo in America* (remake of *One day at a time*) rested on the different accents portrayed by the actors. Audiences mentioned the confusion in how in the same family, the mother speaks with a Puerto Rican inflected Spanish, while the daughters clearly speak Colombian Spanish. This caused great confusion in an audience accustomed to the ‘standardized’ Mexican language variety of telenovelas, which comprised the majority of Spanish programming in the U.S.

Implications-Conclusions

A tentative conclusion within this presentation deals with the notion that telenovelas are no longer commodities purely produced by Latin American networks. Telenovelas have become transculturated and transnationalized products made north of the Rio Grande, implying that the representation of Latinidad is not just inscribed and controlled by Latin American networks, but also by media conglomerates outside of the control of Latinos. This leads to a problematic construction of Latinidad since it is constructed from a privileged position. However I am not claiming this hegemonic construction of Latinidad has a totalizing effect. Rather through the use of the telenovela genre, Latinidad can be constructed following a multiple directions that can include the cultural agencies of subordinate cultures.

ⁱ My critical evaluation on the part of Telemundo’s failure has to do with the removal of the language of melodrama that is the telenovela. It was inconceivable to audiences that a Spanish language network would drop telenovelas from their primetime schedule. Countless studies (Dávila, Levine, Rodríguez) conclude that viewers watch Univisión and Telemundo because of its telenovelas. These melodramatic programs have been marked as authentically Latin American by its viewers and it’s the element that differentiates Spanish language channels from mainstream U.S. networks (Levine). Through this change of programming, Telemundo felt they were not just going to offer entertainment but they were going to respond by correcting televisual practices that

have made a large bicultural-bilingual community invisible. Telemundo's programming shift would not only benefit an ignored community, but would also help the corporation since the network's ability to construct a well defined demographically specific target audience, would cause advertisers to eagerly back such venture.

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