Situating Spectatorship: Latina and Chicana Responses to Representations in American Popular Culture

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Introduction

Precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites with specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies. Moreover, they emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity – an ‘identity’ in its traditional meaning (that is, an all-inclusive sameness, seamless, without internal differentiation)… Identities are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us…The notion that an effective suturing of the subject to a subject-position requires, not only that the subject is 'hailed', but that the subject invests in the position, means that suturing has to be thought of as an articulation, rather than a one-sided process, and that in turn places identification, if not identities, firmly on the theoretical agenda. (4)

- Stuart Hall, Questions of Cultural Identity

This project explores the relationship between contemporary American television media and those who consume it. When I began, I aimed to develop a better understanding of the impact that media representations of women have on female viewers. So much noise surrounds the potentially destructive power of manipulated and fragmented ideals on the female psyche; I wanted to examine the scope and validity of these arguments.

The purpose of this study has its roots in theories of cultural identity and representation studies. Numerous psychological studies exist to demonstrate the connections between unrealistic body ideals, unhealthy body image and low self-esteem and self-efficacy. But setting aside the subliminal, what is the nature of Americans’ conscious lived experience in the context of contemporary media culture? How does contemporary media culture impact our understandings of ourselves and our identities, and how do ourselves and our identities impact our understandings of it? In this paper specifically, I engage with these questions by exploring the responses of Latina women to representations of Latina identity in contemporary American television, and specifically in the ABC sitcom Modern Family.
My work is informed by theories of hegemony and intersectionality in societal structures and draws heavily on Stuart Hall’s concepts of cultural identity as discursive practice. This paper also rests fundamentally on reader response and spectatorship theories of media analysis. The field of film studies has long since acknowledged the role of viewers in interpreting and creating meaning from media, just as many scholars of textual analysis recognize the agency readers have in constructing the meaning of the text. Schools of thought have developed with the purpose of examining this space in between text and reader (or film and spectator). I ask first, in what ways does contemporary television media reproduce, engage, and subvert traditionally hegemonic power structures in American identity politics? Next, how do individuals in the position of spectator practice acquiescence or resistance to the sociopolitical implications of media representation? And, ultimately, what does spectator testimony tell us about current scholarship in the field?

The theoretical concepts themselves of reader and spectator agency took new form in 1984, when Janice Radway revolutionized the field with her publication of *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. Combining the vocabularies of cultural theorists and reader response scholars, her particular innovation was the inclusion of the readers themselves in her study of women’s romance novels in their sociopolitical context. The book comprises not just paraphrased responses, but direct communications and verbatim quotations from women speaking on patriarchal backdrops to contemporary literature. Radway pushed existing scholarship to the clear next step of collecting reader voices, in order to advance and complicate theory by applying it. And though scholars have agreed that this method requires further practice, both before Radway’s book and after it, *Reading the Romance* remains one of very few texts to actively explore reader voices.
I aim now to treat television viewers in the manner that Radway treats romance readers. Contemporary scholarship on media representations and film spectatorship laud the promise of utilizing the type of methodology Radway helped pioneer to better evaluate the function of media in American society in general. That is to say, the developed application of reader response and spectatorship theory serves to advance the general field of cultural studies and ideally also to enhance understandings of what constitutes cultural progress at present. But this work often happens not in sweeping broad brushstrokes, but in careful attention to particular and specific arguments. Radway individuates experiences of gender in a patriarchal context. I will explore particulars of ethnic identity politics in relation to television media.

Stuart Hall writes that identity is not a fixed quality, but rather something that happens from moment to moment. Identity takes shape when individuals assign internal relevance to external values, allowing “points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us.” Every time we read an article, a novel, a film or a photograph that represents in some form or another a quality we know our bodies to possess (or perhaps the absence thereof), we encounter an opportunity to reshape our identities.

Can we determine whether interactions with media representations have more or less of an impact on the construction of identity than interactions with friends and family? Do the moments of suturing that occur while viewing representations of women on television differ from those that occur while reading novels? How? Is it even possible to isolate the sources of idealized identity qualities, such as body standards, into separate categories like media and interpersonal interaction, and to study their discrete effects? Surely they are inextricably bound, a chicken-or-egg conundrum.
But perhaps it is possible to study specific instances of identity construction and articulation, even as they exist within these larger webs. In attempts to specify the circumstances, as Radway does with women, patriarchy, and romance novels, I have concentrated this paper on Latina women’s relationships to representations in contemporary American television, focusing on qualities associated with systems of ethnic identity.

Consider the trope of the Latina entertainer in American culture. Reduced to a most basic trend, three features stand out. First of all, there is a shortage of varied representation in a history of American television. Secondly, the most commonly emphasized characteristics among those who receive notable screen and press time: a strong Spanish accent, a big booty and a full chest, a “spicy” temperament. And thirdly, perhaps more insidiously, a homogenization of regional and national identities into a generalized “Hispanic” category, often one that disproportionately reflects Mexican culture.

Much of the existing scholarship examining Latina entertainers and representations of Latina women in film and television draws from historical and sociological theoretical frameworks to contextualize trends like the above. However, very few studies invoke the role of the spectator in adding meaning to a text, or explore the relationship between Latina viewers and Latina representations in any degree of depth, as Radway does with romance readers. But when we consider Stuart Hall’s conceptualization of the webs that stretch between individuals and institutions (both cultural and sociopolitical), the importance of exploring this relationship becomes clear.

The bridge in scholarship between concepts of spectatorship and concepts of cultural identity in general is fragile at best, but the theoretical relationship proves intuitive. I aim to
strengthen that bridge, and to establish a better precedent for the application of spectatorship
theory in relation to representation studies into the discipline of American Studies.

I begin this study by surveying the bodies of literature regarding both cinema
spectatorship and Latina entertainers as well as the theories of Stuart Hall and other cultural
theorists. It incorporates data gathered by speaking with women directly about their cultural
identities in relation to representations in contemporary American television, informed by the
literature. I include the content of oral history interviews with four women, all colleagues of
mine as fellow undergraduate students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The
paper that follows is an exploration of these conversations and the insight they offer into
American life.

And a note on my choice to focus this paper on Latina entertainers and Latina women:. This paper chooses to center Latina women for two reasons. Firstly, gaps in the literature warrant
this focus. Secondly, the most notable (in my eyes) problems with contemporary American
television demand a critical interrogation of shifting trends in representations of ethnic identities,
and perhaps especially Latina identities, considering the constitution of the American public.

I do not presume to speak for a Latina identity; I do my best in this paper to allow the
voices of female media consumers to speak for themselves. After all, much of my motivation in
writing on theories of spectatorship lies in the belief that cultural studies scholarship in general
could stand to practice this methodology more fully.
I. Traditions of Latina/o Representation Studies

In order to understand the theoretical relationship between film studies and ethnic studies, we must first define the traditions of each with respect to Latina/o identity. This section presents an overview of each canon as it has developed over the twentieth century and especially over past decades. The review also demonstrates the focus on structural elements of film and television media and the prioritization of the producers’ agency over that of spectators in creating the sociopolitical meaning in film and television media.

Film studies as a discipline has its origins in the early twentieth century and has largely concerned itself with the technical aspects of film production. As the influence of film in culture grew, so did its presence in the academy. Film theory and analysis have undergone evolutions in much the same way that literary theories have, from a focus on “the production and subjective critique” of texts and the formal aspects to a more critical, historically and socially contextualized approach.

The first institutional ethnic studies departments (as well as the first works in cultural studies) took shape in the late 1960s and early 1970s, blossoming in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement. Defined generally as the interdisciplinary study of racialized people in the world in relation to ethnicity, concentrations such as Chicana/o studies and African American studies often function as subsets of the practice.

Ethnic studies scholarship quickly gave birth to a canon of literature we can classify as representation studies: the analysis of relationships between the formal aspects of media production with respect to racialized characters (including but not limited to film) and the lived experiences of individuals to whom those racialized identities apply. This is the canon that most closely informs my study.
The texts exploring traditional African American caricatures most prominent during the Jim Crow era (Mammy, Coon, Tom, Jezebel, etc.) function as formative works in representation studies, with specific attention to black identities. They catalogue disseminations of these stereotypes across American culture and history and examine the role the stereotypes play within underlying sociopolitical power structures, and specifically in perpetuating them. Theorists like bell hooks have written subsequently on the experience of subjectively responding to reductive representations of one’s identity: developing an “oppositional gaze.” hooks’s writing in particular stands out as work that merges objective analysis and subjective, personal experience with respect to representations.

Traditions of Latina/o representation studies have taken a similar shape. In 1992, Chon Noriega published a landmark work in the field of Latina/o representation studies, *Chicanos and Film: Essays on Chicano Representation and Resistance*. This collection of essays, edited by Noriega, describes its own purpose as “an attempt to respond to recent developments in three related areas: the representation of Chicanos and Chicanas in Hollywood and the Mexican cinema, the continued growth and diversification of a Chicano counter-cinema, and the emergence of Chicano film criticism as a distinct subfield within both Chicano and film studies” (xi). Defining his aim as the isolation of the Chicano “image” in order to analyze it in its historical and sociopolitical context, Noriega claims common ground with other groups fighting for institutional spaces of study—black, feminist, gay, and lesbian film scholars in particular.

In 2002, after “more than a decade of teaching, writing, and lecturing about stereotyping in movies in general and the depiction of Latinos in Hollywood film in particular,” Charles Ramírez Berg published *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion, and Resistance* (2). His book, alongside Noriega’s, remains one of the first few to specifically address the phenomenon
of Latina/o stereotyping in film. Ramírez Berg further develops the space where Noriega laid foundations; his book clearly, comprehensively and thoroughly treats the concepts already known by Latina/o studies scholars that for all intents and purposes had yet to be decisively canonized.

_Latino Images in Film_ catalogues in great detail historically prominent caricatures of Latina/o figures and investigates stereotypes in media as “part of a social conversation that reveals the mainstream’s attitudes about Others.” The first object of his work, Ramírez Berg writes, is to situate film representation “within a social and historical context.” He summarizes, “The case of Latino stereotyping in mass media involves a discursive system that might be called ‘Latinism’ (a play on Edward Said’s Orientalism): the construction of Latin America and its inhabitants and of Latinos in this country to justify the United States’ imperialistic goals” (4). He names the second aim of the book as follows:

…we need to investigate how standardized cinematic techniques, the accepted norms of ‘good’ filmmaking (including the star system, casting, screenwriting, camera angles, shot selection, direction, production design, editing, acting conventions, lighting, framing, makeup, costuming, and mise-en-scène), all contribute to the totality of the image we call a stereotype. Furthermore, we need to explore the narrative function that stereotypes play within classical Hollywood films and their purpose in various popular genres (5).

The third aim of Ramírez Berg’s book is to look “at some ways that Latino filmmakers have tried to break with this pattern of representation through self-representation” (5). As Ramírez Berg asserts, “Hollywood studio films are the dominant’s cinema. In the main they
positively represent—and through their narratives and resolutions they typically endorse—the prevailing or dominant ideology” (25). He argues that Latino stereotypes in mainstream film are “radical transformations of real-life Latinos” (30), reductive and derogatory, created and disseminated through mobilized white supremacist power structures in order to contain and undermine threats to that power structure and thereby maintain the status quo. The work of Latino filmmakers in opposition to the dominant media industry then functions as the system’s primary counterpoint. “Hollywood stereotyping was the Thesis…and Chicano filmmakers, from their ideological short films and documentaries of the late 1960s and 1970s to their more recent forays into mainstream studio cinema, are busily creating the Antithesis” (36-37).

Each of Ramírez Berg’s three purposes presents itself in Noriega’s original collection; *Latino Images in Film* works to reorganize and explicate them more fully and more cohesively. Ramírez Berg’s book, like Noriega’s, thus signifies a seminal example of film studies and ethnic studies intersecting.

Much like the Women’s Cinema movement in the 1970s that existed in opposition to Hollywood trends, the Chicano Cinema movement has been documented quite well. Gary D. Keller published a collection of essays specific to the task in 1985, *Chicano Cinema: Research, Reviews, and Resources*. His book precedes and informs Ramírez Berg’s synthesizing work. But this paper does not particularly concern itself with resistance to representational hegemony in the form of oppositional cinema production, for the reasons that analyses of oppositional cinema are both sufficiently present in the canon and that they do not truly differ in theoretical methodology from analyses of dominant mainstream cinema. I will, however, overview the sociopolitical history of trends in Latina/o representation that have been catalogued, because this context still forms the basis for my attempts to evaluate representations of cultural identity.
Ramírez Berg’s book provides a taxonomy of Latino stereotypes in Hollywood productions up through the time of its publication, many characteristics of which are still more than applicable to representations in today’s media. He cites the major connotative elements that are potentially compressed into a single stereotypical image as: race, nationality, narrative role, behavioral tendencies, psychological condition, moral schema, and ideological signification. He goes on to interrogate the impact of cinematographic choices in imbuing Latino characters with political meaning: positions on the edge of the frame; high-angle shots that render subjects “less dominant and more vulnerable” (46); and other more obvious tropes including reductive costume choices and the scripted/screenwritten dynamics between characters.

Next, we come to his direct identification of traditional caricatures. As this discussion represents the site of most existing analyses in representational studies with regards to Latino/as in film, I will not attempt to do it the justice in this paper that other books can offer. Instead, I will provide an overview.

In his book, Dr. Ramírez Berg enumerates six Latino stereotypes that exist as part of storytelling conventions in film, their visibility dating back to as early as 1914. These are El Bandido, The Harlot, The Male Buffoon, The Female Clown, The Latin Lover, and The Dark Lady. The Bandido signifies the villainous Latino miscreant, frequently violent and vulgar but rarely cunning. The Harlot is effectively the Bandido’s lusty female counterpart. The Male Buffoon and the Female Clown are comparably unintelligent comic tropes, prime examples of the utility of reductive caricatures for the purposes of humor. The Latin Lover, Ramírez Berg traces to Rudolph Valentino; this figure is a more positively treated device, but still one that reduces Latino identity to aggressive sexuality. The Dark Lady is a similarly sexualized Other, traditionally standing in comparison to an Anglo woman.
Mary Beltrán, in her 2009 book *Latina/o Stars in U.S. Eyes: The Making and Meanings of Film and TV Stardom*, references Berg’s “age-old” stereotypes and asserts, “These sorts of one-dimensional images continue to be seen and to carry weight today, even as some Latina/o actors and media professionals are experiencing greater opportunity” (2). We can see two main trends at work here that persist to the present: the flattening of Latina/o identity to caricatures emphasizing accent and color especially for the purpose of comedy or other utilitarian narrative catalysis, and the hypersexualization of Latina/o identity, reminiscent of bell hooks’s theories in her 1992 essay “Eating the Other” (from *Black Looks: Race and Representation*). Scholars have explored the latter in particular with respect to restrictions on Latino male sexual identity, as in Daniel Enrique Pérez’s 2009 *Rethinking Chicana/o and Latina/o Popular Culture*, and in furthering discussions of the body as politicized space, especially for Latina women.

Beltrán focuses especially on the role that specific actors and actresses play in navigating their own role in systems of representation, emphasizing their agency and relevance as well as that of news and print media producers, in addition to the filmmakers and studios that form the basis of preceding representation studies literature. She considers the potential impact of Latina/o entertainers in acting on their particular political contexts. She explores the careers of entertainers including Rita Moreno, Freddie Prinze, Jennifer Lopez, and Jessica Alba, incorporating knowledge about their personal lives and relationships to media producers. The book asks what it was and is like to be a Latina/o in Hollywood given the political status of Latinos in the U.S. at any given time in history (or at least, in the twentieth and twenty-first century). Citing the work of Richard Dyer, among others, Beltrán writes:

…media representation and stardom in particular provides important and telling clues regarding the sociopolitical status of a people within a society, as well as
playing a role in relations between various groups. Not only have they provided images to non-Latinos of who and what Latina/os might be, but over the decades they have provided images to people of Latin descent that can affect how we see ourselves and what we can make of our lives (2).

Myra Mendible, a few years prior to Beltrán’s book, published her work studying the careers of Latina female entertainers specifically and their treatment in social and historical contexts with *From Bananas to Buttocks: The Latina Body in Popular Film and Culture* (2007). Her analyses also emphasize the agency of the celebrities themselves in constructing their own Latina identities as well as systemic understandings of Latina identity, the understanding of which Beltrán also worked to expand from a similar point of view. Both books discuss the role of celebrities in systems of media production, especially considering white hegemony. *From Bananas to Buttocks* emphasizes more the nature of the Latina body as politically charged, frequently due to its hypersexualization by dominant cultural forces, and heavily employs concepts of identity performativity, drawing from the theories of Judith Butler.

The Latina body in popular culture, as Mendible understands it, signifies “an amalgam of eroticized, radicalized tropes about Latinas that inform U.S. popular culture.” Her book aims “to explore various deployments of Latina identity and sexuality in light of current work in body theory” (3). The essays in *Bananas to Buttocks* employ much of the same vocabulary as Ramírez Berg in evaluating portrayals of Latina women in terms of structural film analysis: the shoes they wear, the hypersexual narrative roles they fill, and the aesthetics of Latina Barbie dolls as compared to Caucasian ones, among other elements. Mendible certainly benefits from the work of Ramírez Berg in that his foundational text enables her to pursue particulars of his taxonomy in great detail, without needing to expend a great deal of pages on the framework of representation.
studies for Latina/os. But *Bananas to Buttocks* diverges from Ramírez Berg’s methodology in that its narrowed focus (on caricatured representations of Latina women specifically) ultimately allows for a more complex and nuanced investigation of representations and the role they play in cultural systems.

Mendible’s book considers the careers of Lupe Vélez, Jennifer Lopez, Penelope Cruz, Shakira, and Lorena Bobbitt, among others, in their social and historical contexts, with particular focus on the ways in which these entertainers work to curate their own ethnically specific identities as public figures and especially with respect to their bodies. Mendible refers to these curations as “star texts,” the discursively constructed identities these women create that are then read and responded to by the public. The “star text” also marks a final section of exploration in Ramírez Berg’s original overview.

Ultimately, all of the aforementioned authors emphasize to some degree the role of the actors and actresses themselves in claiming agency over the production of representations that hold the potential to perpetuate traditionally unequal sociopolitical power dynamics. Mendible states:

> …we aim to affirm the role of individual agency in the constitution and decoding of our ethnic corporeality, even as we ‘talk back’ to the dominant media that render Latino/as visible and knowable. In showcasing the Latina body as a site of knowledge production, we claim a space for Latinidad that is invariably gendered, hybrid, and transactional…the ‘ethnic self is relational, constructed through discursive and bodily mediations that signal its relative status (5).

But the content of the literature thus far might suggest that this discursive model can only successfully be applied to filmmakers and celebrity entertainers—institutional, oppositional, and
otherwise highly visible and easily studied agents of media production (and thereby of representations). Ramírez Berg, Mendible, Beltrán, Pérez, and even Noriega’s work in representation studies focuses on analyzing the ways that studios, news media, and actors and actresses influence cultural and systemic understandings of ethnic (and gendered, etc.) identity. Even as recently as 2013, in Patricia Montilla’s *Latinos and American Popular Culture*, an extensive collection of essays exploring contemporary representations of *Latinidad* as yet untreated by the academy, we are left wanting for treatment of the viewer.

The existing models set up by ethnic studies theorists, and specifically those in the preceding review, strongly prompt this desire to examine the voices of viewers. Each text, at some point, acknowledges the importance of the spectator in assigning value to the representations in question. In her essay, “Representing Latinidad in Children’s Television: What Are the Kids Watching?” Erynn Masi de Casanova writes:

> As I do not have access to the production process nor to the responses of viewers…my focus will necessarily be on the content of the shows…An evaluation of the ‘goodness,’ ‘authenticity,’ or ‘accuracy’ of media portrayals assumes or produces a singular, privileged interpretation of the text, rather than allowing for variation in the ways that individuals consume, react to, discuss, and use such texts…I conclude by emphasizing the need to research further how they are consumed, received, and interpreted (Montilla 23).

As I will demonstrate in the next chapter, Stuart Hall’s theories of cultural identity as discursive practice support the idea that no articulation of identity construction through media representation can be complete without a thorough study of the audience’s role in the systemic process. A synthesis of existing texts on representation studies with the responses of viewers
offers a small-scale model of the real-life discourse between representation and identity that individuals experience.
II. Envisioning Audience Reception

The good news is that audience reception of these mass-mediated texts is rarely as predictable or manageable as its producers envision...these star texts are coproduced by viewers themselves in various ways.

– Myra Mendible, From Bananas to Buttocks: The Latina Body in Popular Film and Culture

Stuart Hall’s writing in Questions of Cultural Identity (1996) poses a challenge fundamental to the discipline of American Studies, essentially articulating a central creed of the field, that the coherence we seek as theorists is perhaps inescapably ultimately unattainable. Hall takes as his subject the discursive practice of identity construction, posited by Michel Foucault in 1970 and further developed by the feminist and cultural criticism theorists of the latter half of the twentieth century (Lacan, Althusser, Derrida, Laclau, Butler, Heath, Hall himself). Hall asserts in no uncertain terms that identity is not fixed, but rather fluid; it is not unified, but rather fractured. In fact, Hall undermines the idea of identity itself as a quality we can possess; rather, he describes identity as a constant ongoing process by which the individual as subject assigns internal relevance to external articulations of quality. Hall calls this a process of “suturing,” of tying oneself to a subject position. Furthermore, Hall asserts that the subject positions to which we suture ourselves only ever exist in relation to an Other, some identity position with which to contrast our own. By this assertion, no such thing as an identity quality exists in itself at all.

Present-day scholars generally accept Hall’s work and the deconstructive discursive theories of the philosophers on whom he builds as acceptable foundations for the study of identity, even as these theories evoke their own potential futility. Given the always-changing nature of human identity, any attempt to articulate the state of a given cultural identity runs the risk of falling obsolete almost as soon as it is verbalized. But even if no quality of cultural
identity exists in itself, prior to processes of representation, we undoubtedly consciously experience the processes of suturing ourselves to identity qualities. And so, the qualities must originate somewhere and the discursive process clearly manifests social and political consequences, and the critical theorization of this process is therefore necessary and valid, however potentially partial.

We can understand Cultural Studies theories as the philosophical and conceptual bases for more location-specific articulations of identity as are present in American Studies. The concepts of cultural identity as Hall articulates them necessarily underpin any endeavor by American Studies theorists to describe a given social situation. If a theorist describes any identity defined by geography, religion, gender, race or ethnicity, any of the like, the presence of the suturing process is readily apparent. If, however, a theorist describes in a less overt manner the geographical culture, the gendered culture, the culture as a system potentially independent of individuals, still we see the summoning process to which readers and individuals are called to respond.

A focus on the discursive process for Hall indicates the “decentring of the subject,” which is to say, an emphasis less on individual identity and more on the complex web of social and cultural forces that author identities in concert with individual consciousnesses. He claims, “It has never been enough…to elaborate a theory of how individuals are summoned into place in the discursive structures. It has always, also, required an account of how subjects are constituted” (13). That is, to truly understand the relationship between individuals and identities is not simply a matter of articulating the positions to which individuals as subjects are called and the means by which they are called. We must also study the methods by which individuals agree to suture
themselves to these positions, a task which cannot be performed without a sort of mass public psychoanalysis.

Hall argues, “the decentring of the subject is not the destruction of the subject, and since the ‘centring’ of discursive practice cannot work without the constitution of subjects, the theoretical work cannot be fully accomplished without complementing the account of discursive and disciplinary regulation with an account of the practices of subjective self-constitution” (13). What we need, he claims, is:

…a theory of what the mechanisms are by which individuals as subjects identify (or do not identify) with the ‘positions’ to which they are summoned; as well as how they fashion, stylize, produce and ‘perform’ these positions, and why they never do so completely, for once and all time, and some never do, or are in a constant, agonistic process of struggling with, resisting, negotiating and accommodating the normative or regulative rules with which they confront and regulate themselves (13-14).

I hope with this paper to investigate these mechanisms and to develop the theory that Hall calls for by engaging individuals in considering their own discursive processes of identity construction. I chose to employ oral history methodology in achieving this goal; oral histories serve to collect, contextualize, and canonize individual as opposed to systemic forces of identity construction often with respect to articulations of geographical or class-based identity. A relatively free-flowing interview form, this method allows the speaker to give their responses the space to incorporate any and all relevant thoughts to the prompt at hand, as they see fit. Such an approach works particularly well in consideration of Hall’s discursive process as he describes it—questions of identity can rarely be answered with simple and concise statements.
Furthermore, oral histories celebrate the unique nature of each individual’s life experience. Such a celebration concurs with this paper’s intent to question stereotypes and homogenized representations in favor of deconstructing labels.

I chose also to isolate the relationship between individual identities and representations of Latina identity in particular in contemporary American television as a strand in the web that Hall theorizes. Positionings of individuals as subjects on film and television work on our consciousnesses in a manner arguably more powerfully and more ubiquitously than, say, representations of identity qualities in print literature. The American public more widely and more continuously processes film images. Their qualities are more visual and less verbal, causing film representations of gendered, racialized, ethnicized qualities and the like to often act more insidiously on the public than printed word. As discussed in the previous section, the body of literature dedicated to exploring the production of these positions in film has been steadily growing over the past five decades. But still, concepts of audience reception of film in studies of identity discourse remain in precariously theoretical territory, when scholars should be developing their application.

Here, I engage spectatorship and reception theories in concert with Hall’s suturing process, as several scholars have done before. What follows is a case study in the application of spectatorship theories as an attempt to develop the more general theory of the discursive processes of identity construction.
III. Engaging Spectators

In an attempt to develop theories of identity construction informed (but not overshadowed) by Stuart Hall’s precedents, I interviewed four students from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill who identify as Latina about their experiences as viewers of contemporary American television. In this section, I first describe my interview methodology and then begin to present the immediate substance of our conversations with respect to representations of ethnic identity on screen.

My first interviewee was Carla Salas, a classmate of mine from a Women’s Studies course on Leadership in Violence Prevention. Carla is a senior English major with minors in Latina/o Studies and Women’s and Gender Studies. She is from Chicago, Illinois, and identifies as Mexican-American.

My second interviewee was Caroline Carrasco. Caroline is a senior scholar studying Health Policy and Management (in the School of Public Health) with a Sustainability Studies minor. She hails from Mooresville, North Carolina, a relatively small town in the western half of the state. Caroline self-identifies as Peruvian-American.

Caroline introduced me to my third interviewee, her roommate, Natalia Gonzalez-Chavez. Natalia is also a senior, studying Advertising through the School of Journalism and Mass Communications and minoring in Entrepreneurship. Natalia characterizes her identity as split fairly evenly between American and Colombian, in terms of her lifestyle and day-to-day experiences.

Finally, I interviewed Manuela Nivia, a coworker of mine from the Carolina Performing Arts house staff. Manuela is a sophomore from Kansas studying Global Studies and Psychology;
she, like Natalia, spent time growing up in Colombian and identifies strongly with her Colombian identity.

The interview process began with my reaching out to these women personally about their interest in participating in the research. I had previously narrowed my focus to four American television shows for their prominence as shows that feature Hispanic and Latina characters and actresses: *Modern Family*, *Orange is the New Black*, *Desperate Housewives*, and *Ugly Betty*. The focus quickly narrowed again to *Modern Family* specifically, as all four women had watched and enjoy watching this show.

Based on the critical frameworks discussed in previous pages, I wanted to focus in the interviews on spectator reactions to the ways in which these shows offer representations of Latina women in an American cultural context. With the focus now on *Modern Family*, I expected to discuss Sofia Vergara in her role as Gloria, the young and beautiful Colombian wife of the show’s main patriarch, Jay Pritchett. In crafting my guiding interview questions, however, I wanted also to elicit responses that spoke to the spectators’ attitudes towards media in general and their relationships with representations with which they do or do not identify.

*Modern Family* first aired on ABC in September of 2009. Now in its sixth season, the show has been met with widespread critical and public acclaim and has received numerous awards and nominations. Categorized as both a situational comedy and a “mockumentary,” the series follows the lives of three interrelated families as they attempt to handle life’s trials and tribulations.

Jay Pritchett, the crew’s umbrella patriarch, has remarried the young and beautiful Gloria Delgado (Vergara) and they raise her son Manny together. Gloria’s cultural misadventures as a
Colombian transplant function as a driving source of comedy in the show. Jay’s daughter Claire has married Phil Dunphy, and they try to be cool, hip, successful parents to their three growing children: Haley, Alex, and Luke. Jay’s son Mitchell has partnered with the large and loud Cameron Tucker; the two have adopted a daughter, Lily, from Vietnam, and are married in season five of the show. Their relationship as a gay couple is also frequently a source of humor, but as with the other characters, the show’s jokes tend to emanate more from the characters’ complex personalities than from overly stereotyped identity labels.

Still, the potential for stereotyping is particularly present in the show’s treatment of Gloria’s (and Manny’s) Colombian identity and of Cameron and Mitchell’s sexual identities, and this potential must be carefully navigated. If we consider the creation of meaning between text and reader as intertwined with and analogous to discursive processes of identity construction (when an individual sutures themself to some aspect of the meaning in question), the way that the show cracks jokes about these identities is as important as the ways in which viewers respond to the jokes.

This section begins to explore viewer interpretation, but it is also important to consider the “star texts” at play, according to the models of meaning set up by authors like Mendible and Beltrán discussed in the previous chapter. Vergara, a Colombian actress playing a Colombian character, has found a great deal of public appreciation for her comic but empowered portrayal of Gloria Delgado (Gloria Pritchett) on the sitcom. Some have criticized the character as ditzy, airheaded, and “on the verge of a nervous breakdown,” or as too sexualized, evoking stereotypes of the Latin bombshell that Ramírez Berg describes in his early work on representations of Latina/os. But a greater number of others defend the character as one comic figure that happens to capitalize on her Colombian brand of humor—very successfully, as it happens. Vergara
herself has said in response to the criticisms, “Whoever said that all Latin women are the same? It’s impossible to caricature millions of women from 20 countries. There are many kinds of Latinas, just like there are many types and styles of women all over the world.” Her comments effectively highlight the fallacy inherent in the critiques: that to assume the characteristics of one Latina character are true of any woman who might also identify as Latina is to be guilty yourself of the stereotyping you critique.

Each interview that I conducted began with a discussion of how the women understand their own identities, in whatever terms. The premise of our conversations privileged their relationships to ethnic, linguistic, and national identity categories, but I wanted the prompt to feel as open as possible to identities beyond that. Manuela, for example, quickly identified herself as Colombian, heterosexual, Christian, and female, in that order. Carla identified as a senior at UNC-Chapel Hill first, twenty-two years old, quickly followed by “Latina from Mexican descent.” She also rattled off “female, daughter, sister, things like that.” Caroline said, “I identify as a Latina woman. I identify more strongly with my nationality, which is Peruvian.” Natalia offered her Colombian identity first and foremost, contextualized only by her identification as American, too.

We then began discussing the show(s) in question. When did you start watching it? Why? With whom? What were your expectations for the show? Did the show meet your expectations? What do you know about the background of the show, the actors, and the production processes? For Modern Family, the responses varied from “I started watching it because my boyfriend was really into it” (Manuela), to picking up on the show from friends (Caroline), to family members

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adoring the program (Natalia). All four women indicated that they watched in anticipation of well-executed comedy, which was Carla’s main reason for watching. As for whether or not the show met this expectation, the response was pretty unanimously yes.

Our conversations next transitioned to more direct discussions of representation. My guiding questions included: How do you feel about the way the show represents Latina women? How do you see the function of Latina characters in the show? How do you think this show compares to other shows with Latina characters? What do you know about the actresses in this show and the producers or the production process? Would you say that the representations of women in this show affect the way you understand your own identity? If yes, how so? What would you say most impacts the way you understand your own identity?

The responses to these questions illuminate a great deal about the sorts of dialogues going on both within and between spectators of a given program, the specifics of which I will discuss later on. I rounded out the interviews with questions asking participants to characterize themselves as media consumers and to describe more directly their experiences of watching television shows, both in general and in particular.

I want to first examine the more immediate substance of the responses to representations: whether or not each woman found Sofia Vergara as Gloria to be funny, problematic, offensive, confusing, or the like, in what ways and why. What were their reactions to the show, and how did it relate to their own identities? The latter half of this question is intended to evaluate the relevance of theories like Mendible’s and Noriega’s in the Latina/o representation studies canon to contemporary women who identify as Latina.

So, it is also important now to re-examine and expand upon the tropes set up by Noriega, Ramírez Berg, Beltrán, Mendible, Montilla, and the rest. Ramírez Berg with his six Latino
stereotypes in film describes three forms of Latina character: The Harlot, the Female Clown, and the Dark Lady. The Harlot is effectively the Bandido’s lusty female counterpart, the Bandido representing a vulgar and villainous, though not necessarily cunning, Latino miscreant. The Female Clown is a relatively unintelligent comic trope, a prime example of the utility of reductive caricatures for the purposes of humor. The Dark Lady is a sexualized Other, traditionally standing in comparison to an Anglo woman. How do our spectators feel that Vergara as Gloria Pritchett plays into these forms?

The Harlot did not seem to be a particularly relevant characterization. Gloria’s character is at times playfully mischievous, but no more so than an average protagonist; she is certainly not a villain. As for the Female Clown, each of the women did describe to me the comic value of Gloria’s exaggerated personality, considering that her Colombian identity is most often the source of her humorous presence. Opinions differed, however, as to whether or not the exaggerations are reductive. The general reaction to her character seemed to be that she is more or less presenting a three-dimensional and accurate representation of a Colombian identity, but that it is wise to be wary of potential reductions or perpetuations of negative stereotypes.

Carla offered:

I mean, for the most part, like it’s a very...generic stereotype of what a Latina women is, you know, she’s very beautiful, she’s very curvy, she has a super thick accent, um, but a lot of that is just, I feel like, Sofia Vergara’s personality as a whole…you can tell even though it is exaggerated, there are also moments where she’s very connected to her Latina…background…I think there was another moment where…her mom comes to visit, and they mention some taboo topics, just within their culture, and it’s also very stereotypical, but it’s more so tied
closely to the culture, as opposed to just, ‘This is a curvy woman, that’s Latina, that’s supposed to be like this sexual object.

Natalia, who is Colombian and whose whole family watches the show, said that her family could relate to it “a lot.” She cited specific behaviors of Gloria’s that resonated: “‘There's an episode where people make fun of her accent and like, that is my family, straight up…and her loudness, like, that's every Colombian, like, ever…the way she treats Manny…Gloria's accent that everyone was trying to fix, like, I have gone through that so much with my parents.” She went on, “In Colombia, appearances are really important…so the fact that they show her as like, a really well put-together character…that reflects Colombians and I would say it reflects all Latinas. But that doesn't mean that every Latina is going to wear high heels and low-cut shirts everywhere she goes.” Natalia in her interview also strongly problematized the use of jokes about drug cartels in Colombia—those are too reductive for the purposes of comedy, she asserts.

Whenever she talks about being a kid and like, there were shootings at her school or stuff like that? That's not true. That doesn't happen. Or when she'll talk about like, I don't know, drug lords or whatever, like, that's already a pretty big stereotype for Colombians that, we've tried really hard to eliminate, and there have been so many initiatives…The movie Mr. and Mrs. Smith? I think the opening scene shows bombings going off in Bogota. I was born there. I visit every year. I have never seen something like that happen.

Her parents feel strongly about the drug culture jokes as well, even as they identify with other elements of Gloria’s character. Caroline echoed a similar attitude:

For Modern Family, I think it's pretty interesting because while it's very exaggerated, I actually do think a lot of it is pretty accurate. The only things I find
problematic is when Gloria maybe references her family back home that is involved in like, the drug business, I'm like ‘ooh, that can be a little bit of an issue’ because it perpetuates negative stereotypes and makes a country known for maybe the bad side of it. But I think for the most part it's pretty entertaining because I see a lot of similarities in the way she acts with my own family...I have an aunt, Patricia, who is Aunt Gloria.

Manuela also emphasized the resonance of Modern Family’s representations of Colombian personality and traditions.

They'll add a lot of stuff about [Gloria] being Colombian and really emphasize that, the fact that she's not just like, A Latin American woman, the fact that she's specifically Colombian, and...will kind of poke fun at what could be Colombian traditions...Some of them had absolutely nothing to do with anything, like, entirely made-up and exaggerated, whereas some of them maybe do stem from specific Colombian traditions.

Manuela cited the New Year’s episode specifically, in which Gloria discusses a Colombian tradition of eating twelve grapes in celebration of the holiday. She recounted that shortly after viewing this episode with her boyfriend (who is not Colombian), he came over to her house to celebrate New Year’s with her family and found that the tradition was a real one. “My mom was like, ‘Oh, we have this tradition, you have to eat the twelve grapes,’ like in the show, and he was just dying.”

Relevant to these discussions of Gloria’s specifically Colombian identity are the women’s intimations that “Hispanic” and “Latina” are large umbrella terms that frequently result in the homogenization of other identities, especially national identity. Carla, who identifies her
Mexican heritage, discussed an episode in which Manny (Gloria’s son) serves to conflate ideas of Mexican identity and Latino identity more broadly, even though his character’s culture is explicitly Colombian.

I remember, one of the episodes I saw this summer was… actually focusing on her son…his friend has like, an Olympic games for his birthday, and he mentions how he’s always Mexico. So, it kind of goes further than just Latino representation, it kind of shows like the Mexicanization of Latino cultures, which is kind of a problem that a lot of people see. And it kind of just puts you in a weird position if you do happen to be Mexican, ‘cause you’re in that kind of in-between.

This idea of the “Mexicanization” of Latina/o identity came up a few times. Said Caroline succinctly, “People always assume that Hispanic people are Mexican.” But it seems as though at least these four viewers of Modern Family accept the show as effective in avoiding a flattening of ethnic identity and even too great a flattening of national (Colombian) identity in the name of comedic exaggeration, except in certain localized instances. Phenomena such as the Mexicanization of Latina/o identity, according to the interviewees, exist more nebulously in our cultural consciousness and discourses than in Sofía Vergara’s role as Gloria Pritchett, specifically.

The trope of the Dark Lady now deserves our consideration with respect to Modern Family. As Carla stated:

To an extent, when you see Latinas in Hollywood, they’re always overly sexualized. And they may not do that exactly in Modern Family, they may not be as explicit with it, but you know it is common knowledge that Sofía Vergara is a
sex symbol. Not within the show, with other work she does, outside of it, just, in terms of media, so it goes into that.

Caroline named other Latina celebrities she could think of in response to one of my questions attempting to place *Modern Family* within a context of other television media:

I think the only other one I can think of off the top of my head is Penelope Cruz and I don't really identify with her because she's Spanish. She's a Spaniard, from Europe. So it's…very different…Eva Longoria, I'm not really sure…Those are pretty much the only ones I can pick off the top of my head that have gained notoriety in any kind of way. But they've also gained notoriety for very specific things. I mean, politically, you can think of Sonia Sotomayor, and let's see, there are a few more. But in media, those are the few that I think of, and they very much fit this very homogenized archetype of a Latina woman. Beautiful, very sexualized, and I think that kind of carries over. And that could also affect future media, because they're the only ones that are there, so that becomes perpetuated.

All of the women acknowledge both Sofia Vergara’s celebrity image as a sex symbol and the prominence of her sex appeal on the show as Gloria. Natalia qualified Vergara’s image and its relationship to a perceived “sexy Latina” stereotype:

Colombians do have a reputation for being like, sexy Latinas…[Vergara] used to be a lingerie model, so you can kind of expect her character to be sexy.

Manuela had much to say on the sexualization of Vergara’s character:

I think the biggest problem I would have with Sofía Vergara's character, especially on *Modern Family*, would be that even though she's portrayed as this sexy trophy wife type thing, and that can be really empowering for her to...
her ethnic background and identity to like...you know, just, come off as attractive...at the same time, she kind of comes off as like, she's just there as a trophy wife, like is not really given that much input. But then also the fact that her accent just makes it seem like no one really understands her, so she's just kind of there for looks, not necessarily because of like, what her characteristics or traits really bring into the show, and just the fact that...she just comes off as this loudmouth...compared to like, a parrot in the show and stuff, you know what I mean, that she's just kind of there, and so that's something that bothers me about it.

According to Manuela, then, the sexualization of Gloria as a Latina woman is reductive and problematic in the way that Ramírez Berg problematizes the Dark Lady. But not all of the other interviewees felt the same way. And Manuela still, like others of the women I interviewed, did not limit citations of Latina characters as sexy to Modern Family or even to television media. The conversations tended to expand into discussions of other Latina-identified celebrities and then to women in media in general, and then to personal experiences with the relationship between ethnic identity and sexualization. Although it is true that Vergara, the main Latina presence on the show, is also the main sexual presence, the spectators problematized and contextualized the instinct to disparage these circumstances.

But again, much like Ramírez Berg describes, Vergara’s character does stand in opposition to the white matriarch on the show. Said Manuela, “It just kind of seems like [Gloria is] the only one who doesn't fully do parenting...which is very very different from like, the Claire, typical United States type mother.” Claire is, as Natalia said, “what you would think of as like, the typical American soccer mom.” The theme of comparison between the two appeared
often in our conversations. This is in part, according to the interviewees, a product of the aim of the show as a whole to redefine the “typical” American family. Carla offered:

They also do a good job of just having diversity on that show, in general…they have her, and her son, and then they also have the two gay characters, and just, the process that they get to and the lives that they follow. So I guess just a little bit more diverse, like, it does hit a lot of the stereotypes but it does a good job of balancing it, to an extent.

So, these interpretations may at first appear to reflect iterations of traditional stereotypes. But upon closely examining the reactions of these four spectators, it seems also that a negative value judgment does not necessarily always accompany even a clear employment of old tropes, even if it might at times.

I discussed with the project participants further characteristics related to Ramirez Berg’s tropes and related especially to Mary Beltrán’s and Myra Mendible’s work on the Latina body in popular culture described in similarly complex terms, those characteristics primarily being the use of thick accents, the skin tone of the actresses in question, the volume and temperament of the characters, further issues of the conflation of racial, ethnic, and national identity, and intelligence level, more peripherally. Here, the discussion again tended to locate itself in terms of media culture as a whole, and not just with regard to Sofia Vergara and Modern Family. I will overview the related comments.

In addition to Natalia’s comments above on the resonance of Gloria’s accent with her (Natalia’s) family’s relationship to languages, Caroline commented on the use of accent among the Latina characters in the 2013 Netflix series Orange is the New Black:

I think one thing that I thought was interesting about the show was that a lot of the
people in the show had accents, like very thick Spanish accents, which I think is fair…It becomes central to the comedic aspect of it too. But…it's probably also very unfair, because I've had someone compliment me on my English before, and I was like, I am American, like I was born and raised here. Thank you, but like, that's completely irrelevant, I speak English.

Carla described more critically the “one look that Latina women should have,” a “misconception that Latinas in television or in popular media have to be a certain shade, and if you’re anything darker than that then you’re usually not represented as this protagonist.” She went on, “Even within media just in Latino culture, the darker-skinned characters are often the maids or the villains…whereas the lighter-skinned actors are the protagonists or the heroes or the ones who find love at the end of the day.”

Manuela offered: I feel like especially in the media, there's only room, specifically when they're talking about Latinas, there's only room for a specific kind of Latina woman, and it's just like, the voluptuous, big-breast, big lips kind of sexy, fiery woman, instead of…it doesn't really leave any room for like, Afro-American, or Afro-Colombian, you know, Colombian-Hispanic, whatever, women, or like blue-eyed, blonde-haired women either, and it feels like all Latina women have to be portrayed as these sexy characters instead of just portraying like the average, normal…like, there are a few exceptions maybe like, I don't know, like Ugly Betty or something…but it's just like, the other extreme of it, and so I feel like there's not a whole lot of women that like, just regular, regular girls can look up to necessarily. The only thing that's really portrayed is like, the sexy woman that
you're supposed to be. Which, like I said, that can be very empowering, but at the same time I feel like it's on the very high end of the spectrum.

Of temperaments, Caroline described the use of certain words in a specifically sexual way:

Because of these shows, there happens to be a lot of fetishization of Latin-American women as these sexual objects, and I have personally experienced these things. Like people saying I'm spicy, or fiery, or all of these assumptions of how I may or may not be sexually…this is uncomfortable…and I realize a lot of it has to do with media portrayal of Latin-American women.

But she also discussed disposition tropes in terms of her mother’s personality:

It becomes a point of controversy or contention because a lot of it, it is kind of true. Like, my mom is a very sassy woman. I might not be, but it happens sometimes. But where do we draw the line at stereotype and where do we draw the line at like, that's personality? How do we do that? And I think having a wide variety of portrayal of Latina women in the media would help with that. So I don't fit into an archetype.

A discursive process is especially visible in these responses, an evaluation of the representation propelled by identifications of the spectator with the character in focus. The evaluations are clearly differentiated between viewers. They are prompted by the same text, but not specific to the text; the meaning is bled from the speaker as well as from the screen.

Taking all these responses into consideration, the question of evaluating representations has become one of defining a stereotype, as opposed to a trope, and then of evaluating the latter according to a process of identification. Stereotypes are decidedly flat; tropes are merely clichéd.
As bell hooks says in “Representations of Whiteness:”

Stereotypes…are created to serve as substitutions, standing in for what is real. They are there not to tell it like it is but to invite and encourage pretense. They are a fantasy, a projection onto the Other that makes them less threatening. Stereotypes abound when there is distance. They are an invention, a pretense that one knows when the steps that would make real knowing possible cannot be taken or are not allowed.

Gloria, then, is not quite a stereotype—at least, not for our spectators, not in the way that the characters Ramírez Berg describes are violently caricatured. Vergara is a Colombian actress playing a multi-dimensional Colombian character and performing Colombian identity and tradition rooted in Colombian experience. That said, a discussion of her role still provokes critical explorations of the ways in which representations and hers in particular can perpetuate harmful stereotypes.

I turn now to an exploration of the factors that may inform these readings of Modern Family by our spectators in particular, as well as of television and media in general by the millions of spectators whose voices are not present in this paper.
IV. Situating Spectatorship

As demonstrated by the previous chapter, each of the women that I interviewed offered critiques of *Modern Family* alongside praises; they are viewers who enjoy watching the show and are also prepared to problematize it. This chapter presents and explores the various elements of spectator identity that, much in keeping with theories of reader response, inform and shape the substance of the spectator’s interpretation of the show’s meaning. Each woman offers critiques that are personalized and imbued with instances of identification that evoke Stuart Hall’s theories of the discursive process. Most often, the nature of the women’s reactions to the representations in question as either positive or negative correlated with whether or not they identified with that representation according to the terms of Hall’s suturing process.

For example, Natalia critiqued Sofia Vergara’s willingness to perpetuate negative stereotypes about the safety and security of Colombian place and culture by delivering remarks meant to be humorous about cartel-related danger, even as she acknowledged that her family could relate to the show:

That's one thing that does surprise me about Sofia Vergara, that she would be okay with those comments. I feel like most Colombians would not have been okay with that. Like, reading her script…I mean, if it was me, I feel like I would have said, ‘This isn't the way it is, you're getting it all wrong.’

Natalia had previously characterized these kinds of comments as inaccurate with regard to the realities of Colombian culture, citing her ample time in and knowledge of the country. Here, she incorporates her awareness of Sofia Vergara’s Colombian background as relevant to her reading of the jokes in question. Vergara is Colombian, like Natalia, and in her response she attempts to suture herself to the national identity of the actress, but not to that of the character.
Attempt, because Gloria’s Colombian-ness is not the same as Natalia’s, and in a way, neither is Vergara’s.

Consider Myra Mendible’s concept of the “star text.” Imagine the variety of incentives that exist around set for Vergara to concede a joke or two about bombings in Bogota in order to simultaneously claim a presence for Colombian female identity on screen. She rewrites her own Colombian identity according to her positioning at any given time—her profession, her status, her surroundings—in ways that necessarily distinguish it from Natalia’s, or Manuela’s, or their mothers’, even as these identities overlap.

It is not difficult to enumerate the kinds of circumstances of positioning that prompt re-understanding and rewriting of identity. As Hall indicates, these circumstances are practically infinite; every momentary position we find ourselves in serves as an opportunity to reevaluate and redefine our understandings of self, which inevitably also means an understanding of self in relation to others.

I prompted the interviewees to engage just that kind of enumeration with me, and any further positionings that I identified in unprompted speech, we also discussed. But for the purposes of scope, we kept the position of spectator centered in the web of circumstantial experiences in orbit. I asked: Would you say that the representations of women in this show affect the way you understand your own identity? If yes, how so? What would you say most impacts the way you understand your own identity? How would you describe yourself as a media consumer?

My approach to this section is twofold. Firstly, I want to highlight and examine the specific and conscious acknowledgments that the women make about their own processes of identity construction; in other words, how they situate themselves. Secondly, I scrutinize the
perhaps less explicit indications in their speech as to how identity discourses occur; this kind of scrutiny represents my situating them. But given my own positioning as the author of the study, these two aims in analysis of the data are difficult if not impossible to separate. I will attempt, then, to address them both simultaneously, but recognizing the role in the discursive process that this paper itself signifies.

I begin simply by exploring the circumstantial themes that emerged from the women’s interviews, both individually and collectively. The first is educational attainment.

Caroline brought up the importance of explicitly discussing issues of representation and spectatorship as a means of critically engaging and evaluating the media we consume and how we consume it. After lauding it, she situated her experience with these discussions in a specifically collegiate context:

I think one of the great things about being here at school is that people like to talk about this stuff. I talk about this stuff with people who study math… it's hard to figure out what to focus on when we're trying to change something, or how we can change something. And I really think one of the only ways is to talk about it, like this, and try to understand it better, and talk with it to other people.

She went on:

I really think a lot of it has to do with education. Pretty much the only time I was exposed to these issues was when I came to college. I think being in school and being in such a socially aware environment helps it occur, but I think had I not come here and stayed in Mooresville, my hometown, I would never have known or realized that these are real issues, things that I should be concerned about. I think a lot of it comes with being in college, in this environment.
Manuela, Natalia, and Carla corroborated the importance of education for them in developing critical viewership. These women are all self-described critical viewers. Manuela said, “I try to be really conscious about what I watch and what I put out there.” Caroline echoed the sentiment, saying of her consumption of media that she tries to be more conscious. Carla admitted that she tends to “overanalyze” the media that she consumes.

And it shows in their problematizations of *Modern Family*, of Sofia Vergara, and of the things they experience with regard to their identities in day-to-day life. But is this directly related to their presence on this college campus? I would venture to say that no, not necessarily. That is, women with different relationships to educational institutions very likely still problematize contemporary media and their understandings of their own social and cultural identities; although, we may observe a difference in vocabulary. An expanded study with the same mission of engaging individual spectators on the topic of representations might provide insight into both how women with differing relationships to institutions of education discuss representations and identity differently.

Continuing on from the theme of educational attainment, when I asked Carla how she understands her own identity, she discussed shifts in her understanding of it over the course of her transition to and through college:

I think it definitely has to do with just your surroundings. In high school, I went to a predominately Hispanic high school, so that’s something that I never really thought about and something I took for granted. You know, everyone I knew was Hispanic, so the culture was the same, the culture was always there. And then I moved here for college, and it’s a predominately white institution, so there was definitely culture shock. And it wasn’t always negative, it was different...But
through my four years here, I’ve found kind of a nice mix…I’ve really come to terms with, more so, my Mexican identity I think this past year. I joined a sorority that is very culturally-based, and a lot of it was just finding out more about my identity. In terms of being a Latina and being specifically Mexican, which is something I never really thought about before.

From this emerges a second theme: the spectators’ environmental context. For these women, education certainly forms a component backdrop to their individual critical consciousnesses. But the college campus and its particular demographics and politics also simply represent the environment in which they are steeped. Carla explicitly acknowledged the differences in her understanding of self from a predominately Hispanic high school to a predominately white institution of higher education. Caroline offered similar insights, albeit inverted ones:

I think most of the development of my identity happened early on, in the early stages of my life. I think I had to make more of a concerted effort to be more exposed to Latin issues, or Latin people in general, just because I grew up in a very small town in rural North Carolina that didn't have a huge Hispanic population. I'm still undergoing that identity. I think more recently I've become a lot more proud, or a lot more aware…I embrace the Hispanic and the Peruvian side, that identity. I like to call myself Peruvian-American, like a double name or label. Just because I think I'm more comfortable with that now. I guess growing up, I think I was very much an Other, rather than part of the whatever I was living in. Pretty much what influences me is my family, friends, current events and issues that are happening right now, especially with Hispanic being one of the
biggest-growing demographics in the country? I think that all shaped it.

In addition to hinting at the changes that her move to college has brought, Caroline highlighted her individual response to living in a community without a large Hispanic population. She was particularly aware of her cultural identity and, as a result, worked hard to critically cultivate it. She acknowledged the early beginnings of that process of cultivation and recognized without prompting the continuous nature of the discourse. Her last statement, citing “family, friends, current events and issues” as influential in her understanding of self, reinforced the role that environmental context and surroundings—personal or impersonal—play in shaping identity.

Natalia also acknowledged her parents in responding to representations of Colombian identity on *Modern Family*, saying:

My mom feels very strongly about Gloria. She likes certain parts of her but she hates the Colombian jokes, the negative ones that she makes. My dad is more relaxed about that kind of thing, so he's just like, 'It's a joke, it's a TV show, don't worry about it.

Her comments illuminate not only the potential influence of her parents on her own processes of interpreting media, but also the natural likelihood that each of her parents responds differently than she does to the same media stimuli as a result of being positioned differently in society—whether with regard to their age, their status, their educational attainment, *their* parents, or any other combination of the situational circumstances we can consider.

Manuela also described a relationship between her context and her identity, and, like Caroline and Natalia, mentioned her parents:

I moved to the United States when I was ten, and so I've lived half my life in the
United States and half of it in Colombia…but a lot of the way I portray myself, the way I talk and just the way I act in general, is very Americanized, like United States, because that's just like, all of my teen years, all of my formative years were here. But my parents really make a point to ensure that I'm still hanging onto my Colombian roots, which is really important, like I speak Spanish at home with my parents, and we still follow, like even the silly grape thing, we still follow those kinds of traditions… Just being in the United States has influenced me a lot, because I've become very Americanized, but at the same time, the fact that my parents are always making sure that my Colombian identity is a part of my life, so that's also influenced how I view myself…so I always keep up with the news, I'm like, what's going on politically and economically.

This comment also suggests another discursive input: an awareness of historical and cultural context, often as determined by experience. As Caroline states here, this awareness can derive from attention to current events and issues that inform our understandings of cultural identity in a politicized community, however large or small. Natalia, in addition to her comments above criticizing Gloria’s jokes on *Modern Family* that disparage Colombia as unsafe, offered:

It's obviously a joke, like, that stuff doesn't happen--but the thing is, a lot of Americans think that stuff happens in Colombia all the time. Jokes like that could be cracked in Colombia on like, certain levels, if it's really really exaggerated, just because we understand the history of our country and like, what has happened in the past and the way things are now and like, there's still a lot of struggle to like, get peace within the country from things that have happened in the past but I mean, I can definitely say most of the United States does not understand the
history of Colombia or like, what happened with the drug lords a couple years ago and what's happening now so, for those jokes to be put on TV even if it's very very sarcastic, some people might not realize it's sarcasm.

Natalia’s quote provides a multitude of insights into the space between media and spectator. To begin with, she explains her own critical (in the negative sense of the word, especially) reading of Sofia Vergara’s and Gloria’s choice to disparage Colombia in the way that she occasionally does on the show as the product of her own awareness that the statements made are both negative stereotypes (as defined earlier) of the place and also that they are not rooted in truth. Her experience living in and visiting Colombia and growing up in a Colombian household clearly informs her reaction to these jokes: she would prefer that they not be employed. But she also suggests that her reaction to the representation of Colombian identity would not be as negative if the show’s audience were composed exclusively of viewers who were well versed in firsthand experiences of Colombian history and culture. This response suggests that for other women, a positive reaction might occur in response to a representation that accurately represents the culture as they understand it, that resonates with their experience, and that runs no risk of allowing others to identify them as something with which they themselves do not identify.

I am inclined to agree with Natalia, that to viewers who have not experienced a cultural identity somewhat directly, even a slight misrepresentation of that identity for the purposes of humor poses a real risk to those who possess the identity in question—to whatever extent any identity can be “possessed.” (It is perhaps more a question of identifying enough with the features contained by a character or other form of representation.)

But I find Natalia’s comment particularly interesting, in that not only does Natalia evaluate her own reaction to the representation, she also evaluates what she perceives others’
reactions to be (in this case, based on their degrees of cultural awareness with respect to Colombia). This insight indicates another condition of the process of evaluating representations: the recognition that identities to which we suture ourselves are subject to processes of construction in which we are not the authors. Each of the women’s responses to representations and discussions of identity reflects an awareness of the communal nature of cultural identities, even as they are individualized by the processes we discuss.

The women’s responses were also informed to some degree by an awareness of the industrial production processes behind the media in question. These production processes, considered prior to engaging Stuart Hall’s webbed structures of identity discourse, represent the most easily isolated authors of the representations in question, as they stand before undergoing the spectator practices of reaction and evaluation that I discuss with my interviewees. And even then, the (literal) production process comprises directors, writers, lighting and camera technicians, make-up artists and costumers, the actors themselves, and so many more. Mendible’s star texts occur in this stage. But this paper focuses instead on the self-texts, the reading and interpretation of and identification with post-production representations by television viewers. And for the viewers, what they know about how these representations are constructed informs their processes of identification.

Most of the women I interviewed focused on their knowledge of Sofia Vergara as a Colombian actress. Some knew a bit about her career prior to appearing on *Modern Family*. They also shared impressions of her personality, as an actress, as a Colombian woman, and just as a human being. Natalia qualified Vergara’s role in relation to the sexualized tropes of Latina women in media, like those catalogued by Ramírez Berg, saying, “She used to be a lingerie model, so you can kind of expect her character to be sexy… I don’t think it has much to do with
her being Colombian versus her being like, a very beautiful woman.” To revisit a comment of Carla’s:

Well, it’s interesting, because to an extent when you see Latinas in Hollywood, they’re always overly sexualized. And they may not do that exactly in Modern Family, they may not be as explicit, but you know it is common knowledge that Sofia Vergara is a sex symbol. Not within the show, with other work she does, outside of it, just, in terms of media.

Caroline knew, “Sofia Vergara is the highest-paid actress in Hollywood, currently.” She discussed the awards show scandal in which Vergara was placed on a revolving pedestal, showcasing her curves while a network representative praised the content of the show. She critiqued Vergara as an actress in addition to her character on the show, saying, “I think it’s fine to be sex-positive and if you want to be sexy, you can be sexy, but I think it becomes an issue when it's like that's your only point, your only way to have influence.”

In addition to factoring Vergara’s “star text” into their interpretations of the show, the women acknowledged the producers’ intentions for the show to be comedic. Manuela and Caroline both expressed an amicable awareness that almost any time comedy is the focal point of a show, it means more exaggerated representations. But both also went on to qualify their own defenses. Caroline said:

The main issue is that a lot of the time it's meant to be comedic, which can make people take it not seriously, which can make the whole race and ethnicity be misunderstood. Or sexualized, which happens a lot in Modern Family. So I feel like that's where the issues arise. But I can't really think of any other shows that have a strong Latin presence that isn't funny. So I think that could be an issue.
That isn't meant to be funny, at least.

A final theme to consider is that of the women’s relationships to power structures and how these relationships might illuminate their positioning as spectators. Caroline’s comment drives at the underrepresentation of Latina/o figures in the media that all four women recognized. She went on:

I think the term Hispanic-Latino is a very big umbrella term, but I don't necessarily think it's a very accurate one. Because I, for example, don't identify at all with any really kind of Mexican traditions or customs. It's so very different. And I think within the countries in South and Central America it's very very different and diverse. And I think putting that term, yes, it covers an ethnicity or a look, you know, indigenous and European-looking people, but I don't think it's really a fair description. Because it's just so different. The words we use are different, the dances, the food, everything is just so varied and diverse, that it's kind of hard. That's why I like to call myself Peruvian-American, other than Hispanic or Latino or something like that… I think while we are so different, there's definitely a sense of like, I guess in English it's compatriotism? Camaraderie, I think…I think because it's so underrepresented in the media and really in general, anything that's positive is good for all of us. Because I think currently we're facing a lot of opposition and a lot of people are very much against the growth of that demographic and it becomes like a point of defense, so I think that serves as a unifier because…we're proud of this one person for being able to be in that light… I think that there is underrepresentation and that the representation that is happening is not completely accurate…We're trying to get
our foot in the door somehow, so that's like the small step.

When I asked her if she thought we would see a shift in the nature of representations, she replied:

I really hope so. I have a hard time believing it though. Even though we're becoming a bigger demographic, I think there are systems in place that prevent those kinds of things from happening because of the way we consume media, and I think it will take a while. Hopefully it does [shift], but I'm not sure I see it happening in the near future.

I asked her to elaborate on what she meant by “the way we consume media.” She offered:

Because of things like--this is gonna get really technical, really jargon-y—because of things like heteropatriarchy, and because of things like white supremacy, I feel like this becomes the way we think and it becomes engrained in us from a very young age and I feel like those are the things we want to see. Like, we want to see a Latina woman, but not too Latina. Like, she has to look like Sofia Vergara, where she's light-skinned, kind of has light hair, very tall, very pretty, very voluptuous. Because of the heteropatriarchy, too, we want to see a sexy Latina woman. I don't know how long it's going to take to change that. I think that's a cultural shift, a really big one. And I think it's a start to talk about it, obviously. But it's troublesome because it's hard to do.

Caroline also discussed micro-aggressions and sexual assault. Manuela, too, alluded to power structures in the form of patriarchy and rape culture. To revisit and expand upon a quote of hers:

I try to be really conscious about what I watch and what I put out there, especially
through social media, because I'm in a feminist living learning community. I don't know if I would necessarily fully identify myself as feminist, but we've had a lot of conversations surrounding the effects of social media and how women are portrayed in the media.

The women’s comments illuminate a backdrop of power structures that must be discussed when examining constructions of cultural identity. But alongside and intertwined with this sociopolitical context of spectators, one can observe the presence of specific capitalist, industrialist, nationalist, and linguistic influences on their interpretations of the show. This observation precisely represents the concepts of reader response theory. It also illustrates the mechanisms through which hegemonic forces operate and the spaces in which the negotiation of and resistance to hegemony occur.

As demonstrated by the previous chapter, the spectators focus on certain aspects of identity: nationality (Colombian, Mexican, Peruvian), ethnicity (Hispanic or Latina), physical appearance (skin tone, body type, facial features), and behavioral traits (accent, temperament, sexuality, participation in cultural traditions, etc.). They practice identifying or not identifying with these qualities as a result of whether they have or have not experienced firsthand the representation in question:

- “I have gone through that so much with my parents.”
- “That’s not true. That doesn’t happen…I have never seen something like that happen.”
- “I see a lot of similarities in the way she acts with my own family.”
- “I have personally experienced these things.”
Simultaneous to this process of identifying or not identifying with the representations on the screen, there occurs a process of contextualizing instances of identification according to (something akin to) the discursive web that Hall describes. The women discuss the environmental and situational circumstances that inform their senses of self: their education, their geographical location, and their friends and families, among others. These are the terms by which they situate themselves.

But also present throughout every response, every statement of identification or non-identification, is an underlying awareness that their own identities are subject to processes of authorship by people and forces external to themselves. Their repeated use of the word “stereotype,” in particular, communicates their expectations that others (i.e., not themselves) will read and interpret media-produced identities and mistakenly conflate them with lived ones. This expectation manifests itself also in the discussion of the specific stereotypes themselves as ubiquitous cultural presences: “the Mexicanization of Latino cultures”; the “homogenized archetype of a Latina woman…Beautiful, very sexualized”; a joke that “makes a country known for…the bad side of it.” All of these comments assume the backdrop of a cultural consciousness that may or may not resonate with the individual worldview of the speaker.

In some places, the cultural narrative in question stands at odds with the woman’s worldview. In other places, the two agree. At times, the implied collective consciousness is a dominant one, and at other times, it represents a marginalized narrative. Although none of the women ever mentioned the concept of hegemony by name in our interviews (and neither did I), hegemonic structures of consciousness are precisely what we observe. This underlying attitude signifies a constant process of negotiation between collective (dominant) and individual
(marginalized) consciousness.

With respect to theories of spectatorship, this awareness signifies a particular attentiveness to the mass-consumed nature of television media as a factor that influences audience response. Just as viewers incorporate their knowledge of an actress or another member of the production team into their interpretation of the character, they also do not divorce their evaluation of the show’s content from their understanding of its cultural reach—nor from the sociopolitical structure of the culture at the time of viewing.

With respect to theories of cultural identity, this observation suggests a practical awareness of the discursive web theorized by Hall as a condition of identity construction. By attempting to dislodge the identification process from a purely theoretical terrain, it becomes apparent that this discourse happens quite consciously. Each of the women that I interviewed is already theorizing her own identity, in her own vocabulary, without any particular demand for Hall’s or for Gramsci’s.
V. Reimagining Scholarship

Precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites with specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies. Moreover, they emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity – an ‘identity’ in its traditional meaning (that is, an all-inclusive sameness, seamless, without internal differentiation)... Identities are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us...The notion that an effective suturing of the subject to a subject-position requires, not only that the subject is 'hailed', but that the subject invests in the position, means that suturing has to be thought of as an articulation, rather than a one-sided process, and that in turn places identification, if not identities, firmly on the theoretical agenda. (4)

- Stuart Hall, Questions of Cultural Identity

Where do we draw the line at stereotype and where do we draw the line at like, that’s personality? How do we do that? And I think having a wide variety of portrayal of Latina women in the media would help with that. So I don’t fit into an archetype.

- Caroline Carrasco

At the start of this project, I asked: In what ways does contemporary television media reproduce, engage, and subvert traditionally hegemonic power structures in American identity politics? How do individuals in the position of spectator practice acquiescence or resistance to the sociopolitical implications of media representation? And, ultimately, what is the potential impact of this discourse on the greater American social structure?

To answer the first question, this study turned first to a review of the Latina/o representation studies canon of scholarship, beginning with the work of Chon Noriega and Charles Ramírez Berg and leading through to the work of authors like Myra Mendible and Mary Beltrán. These authors write on: the statistical underrepresentation of Latina/o actors and characters in film and television media; the “reductive and derogatory” caricaturing and
stereotyping of those characters who are included according to hegemonic white supremacist power structures, and especially the hypersexualization of Latina women in popular media; and the function and agency of Latina/o producers, filmmakers, actors and actresses in navigating these representations.

These scholarly works draw attention to a longstanding history of discrimination against Latina/os in American media culture that persists to the present. The industry still presents a fairly whitewashed composition, and one does not have to look far to find traces of the traditional tropes. But Latina/o professionals in the business of media production claim a great deal of agency in authoring their own ethnic identities and those of their characters, not just at present, but historically. Sofia Vergara in ABC’s *Modern Family* represents one contemporary example. We know how Vergara and how many scholars interpret her character, even in terms of ethnic identity. This brings us to the next question: How do individuals in the position of spectator practice acquiescence or resistance to the sociopolitical impact of media representation? In a way, the first question cannot be answered in full without also addressing this issue. Television media cannot have any effect on power structures and identity politics without at least one viewer, and in the case of *Modern Family*, there are millions. So in order to understand the function of television shows in American culture, we must also consult television viewers.

To answer this second question, we looked first at the theories of Stuart Hall, with respect to processes of cultural identity construction, and at theories of spectatorship and reader response, with respect to the role of the audience in constructing the meaning of a given text. A synthesis of the two canons suggests that simultaneous processes of authorship occur during any reading (or viewing) experience: authorship of the text’s meaning by both the producer and the
audience, and authorship of the cultural identities represented therein by the same. But these same canons recognize their own choices to focus on agents of meaning other than the spectator as primary.

So, the existing bodies of film studies, representation studies, and cultural identity studies literature make a strong call for developing our understanding of the role that spectators play in the meaning of media. In this paper, I have delineated several elements of representational identity as well as ofspectatorial identity according to both the literature and to the spectator testimonies; in general, the two bodies of data concur—although perhaps according to different vocabularies. As they concur, they reinforce the webbed model of cultural and cultural identity production that Stuart Hall sets up. The nature of this web becomes more visible when localized in the bodies of individual spectators responding to a specified prompt in the form of a television show. The spectators’ responses demonstrate the presence of multiple cultural influences on identity production and media interpretation—but even as these influences are separable momentarily, they operate simultaneously.

As for the question of what spectator testimony tells us about current scholarship in the field, I believe the spectator responses presented here illustrate especially some specific and present-day sociopolitical consequences of allowing mainstream media to perpetuate stereotypes. The interviewees’ reactions to Modern Family suggest that representations of Latina/o identity in contemporary American television have certainly improved in even just the few decades since Ramírez Berg began his work, but that the industry certainly still fails to provide a varied enough representation of Latina/o characters to truly extinguish threats of hegemonic stereotyping among spectators.

This paper also illustrates the value of carefully, thoroughly, and continuously including
the voices of viewers in our studies and evaluations of American media culture. The enterprise is not merely a profitable supplement to existing methodologies; it is and ought always to be considered a primary and integral component. Perhaps, a model of American Studies scholarship ought to reflect the same conscious discursive web as our individual identities, and the same decentering of the academic subject.

But this claim poses, at least for me, a bit of a conundrum. What does the decentering of the academic subject look like if the practice of academic scholarship continues? Where does it leave the author? As I write this paper, I am situating spectators, who situate a character by situating the actress (and the genre) and then situate themselves while also situating me. Perhaps by reading this paper, a television executive or a Colombian actress might situate me and then the viewers and then herself and then her character. The process is instinctive and it is constant. Reader responses and the meanings and functions of the medium and its texts develop as continuously and contemporaneously as the spectators’ identities themselves. And what the spectator voices in this paper communicate more than anything is that they do not need canonized scholarly vocabularies to situate themselves within cultural webs.

So what then, really, is the use of scholarship? To make coherent what otherwise might be less so? To delineate points in the cultural web? It is not as though the women with whom I spoke feel a complete lack of coherence in their identities without making use of the words “hegemony” or “discursive practice.” They do not need those words to theorize their own identities. That does not mean that the distillation that scholarship offers is necessarily useless, but it does mean that coherence or the attempted organization of incoherence can and does happen just fine (potentially better?) without it. So in some ways, this paper is scholarship and not-scholarship, anti-scholarship. So what does that mean for me, situating myself as a scholar
and also a not-scholar, an anti-scholar?

I suppose it means that all the things that I think in a vocabulary of my own are already theory. To canonize them as a scholar might be to mediate between two cultural theoretical vocabularies, just as all who are not scholars do all the time. The scholar is another mediator with a subject position, situating identities as continuously and endlessly as everything else.
Works Cited


