

## **The Importance of Latinx Showrunners in Getting Authentic Latino TV Series in English-Language American Television: The Case of Tanya Saracho and *Vida* (Starz, 2018–2020)**

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The growth of the Latino population in the United States during the 21st century has attracted the attention of television professionals and scholars to this community. This article aims to study the inclusion of Latinx people in American TV series and the correlation between Latinx characters and Latinx showrunners and writers. A literature review on the Latino community in television media has been conducted. After this, a specific case study—*Vida* TV series—is examined following a qualitative methodology based on two theoretical approaches: media production and television aesthetic. These results show that Tanya Saracho has a creative and personal connection to her TV series as showrunner. In conclusion, the traditional stereotyped and limited representation of Latinx people in U.S. TV series is counteracted by hiring Latinx television professionals in the television production process.

*Keywords: TV series, Latinx, showrunner, media production, U.S. television*

In the 21st century, “Latinos are a powerful force in American society” (Negrón-Muntaner, Abbas, Figueroa, & Robson, 2014, p. 1), and the growth of this population has reinforced the “Latina” identity in the country. Mexican people are historically the biggest community of Latinxs in the United States, which has a notable influence over its industry, policy, culture, and society (Scolari & Piñón, 2016). In the words

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of Holling (2012): "In the twenty-first century, challenges—cultural, political, economic, national—perceptibly brought about by and attributed to the increased presence of 'Hispanics' function as one anxiety confronting the United States" (p. 65).

Previous studies have shown the connection between the television representation of ethnic minorities and the social perception of this community (Castañeda, 2018). The growth of this population in the United States has contributed to creating television programs targeted explicitly at Latinx people. However, despite the apparent favorable situation and the measures taken by several associations, such as the National Latino Media Council or National Hispanic Media Coalition, the participation of Latinxs in English-language American TV series is still poor and stereotyped (Negrón-Muntaner et al., 2014). Among other factors considered, the limited inclusion of Latinx professionals in the audiovisual industry is highlighted.

These professionals find more opportunities thanks to premium cable channels and streaming platforms, which allow for better representation of Latinxs on television (Chávez, 2015; Rojas & Piñón, 2014). So that "this industrial landscape opened the viability of nice-oriented, alternative, and ethnic programming, creating a more competitive scenario with an increasing number of national, regional, and global television networks targeting Latina/os" (Piñón & Rojas, 2011, p. 130).

We focus on Latino-oriented programming delivered by mainstream English-language media (Piñón & Rojas, 2011) to narrow the scope of this article since the TV series case study belongs to this group: *Vida* (Saracho, 2018–2020). It is created and produced by a Latinx showrunner and written by a Latinx writers' room, significantly influencing Latinos' representation.

This research is motivated by the increase in the Latino population in the United States during the last decade, as the television market emphasizes the inclusion of Latinx in their castings and writers' rooms (Piñón & Rojas, 2011). The purpose of this article is to contribute to the future of Latino/a/x Studies with a Latino television case study from the media production approach. The main research objective is to determine the connection between television Latinx professionals and their fiction series, focusing on the cited case study. Several studies regarding Latinx characters have been published, but the television professionals' perspective concerning this topic is still missing in the literature. Moreover, Latino TV series on American media has become a "newfound source of information about U.S. Latinos at a time when immigration from Latin America is a prominent and complex social issue" (Avila-Saavedra, 2011, p. 298). Therefore, Latinx showrunners are creating and producing Latino television projects which depict their community's situation in this political, cultural, and social context.

## Theoretical Context

### *Latinx and Latinidad*

The term "Latino" includes "indifferently non-Spanish-speaking populations, as Brazilian, as well as English-speaking Latinos in the United States"<sup>2</sup> (Scolari & Piñón, 2016, p. 15). In this case, some researchers differentiate between Latin Americans and U.S. Latinos, albeit they use the umbrella concept "Latino" to speak about the representation of this community in the Hollywood industry (Ramírez-Berg, 2002). Moreover, although the idea of being Latino is encompassed in a single word, there are vast historical, cultural, and social differences among different countries in Latin America (Scolari & Piñón, 2016). On the other hand, the use of "Latinx" has become prevalent in the last decade and is "the gender-neutral term for a group of mixed Latinos and Latinas" (Ramón, 2016, p. 10).

The term "Latino" arose in the second half of the nineteenth century as an emergent pan-ethnicity to create a collective conscience about Latino people from a political perspective. "Hispano" and "Latino" became linguistic symbols of resistance to the dominant culture in the United States (Gutiérrez & Almaguer, 2016). From a sociological approach, Almaguer (1994) studies the particular situation of California in this context due to its border with Mexico. As we can see in the TV series case study, this state offers race and ethnic relations which affect the social structure. Almaguer (1994) adds, "The nineteenth-century transformation of Mexican California, therefore, provides a unique opportunity for exploring the complex process whereby newly racialized relationships are forged and contested historically" (pp. 3–4). Accordingly, *Vida* (Saracho, 2018–2020) TV series proposes a plot based on an actual urban, racial, and social problem. The show discusses the gentrification through the story of two sisters, bringing to light the hierarchies of racial and class historically settled in California.

It is also essential to center on another concept: *Latinidad*, which academics use to refer to the Latino cultural identity and collective identification in the context of the United States (Avila-Saavedra, 2010; Rojas, 2004). Following the words of Molina-Guzmán and Valdivia (2004), "Latinidad describes any person currently living in the United States of Spanish-speaking heritage" (p. 207). This concept would allow Latinxs to strengthen within political struggles (Gutiérrez & Almaguer, 2016). However, homogenizing the Latino interests in the "Latino vote" is a far more complex task than using a single concept and the idea of a civic *Latinidad* must be promoted from a critical standpoint (Beltrán, 2010).

Mainstream media have the duty of creating a proper discourse of *Latinidad*: the idea of a robust and seamless Latino community. Nevertheless, the representation based on stereotypes associated with *Latinidad* erases specific features of each nationality. For this reason, using a generic term also has negative consequences for the subjectivities of Latinxs from different countries. On the other hand, the critical deconstruction of *Latinidad* would be beneficial for the view of this community. Intending to shed light on this debate, several authors agree with Aparicio (2003) when she expresses: "Instead of rejecting *Latinidad* as an exclusively hegemonic concept that homogenizes Latinos, *Latinidad* can be reclaimed as a site for

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<sup>2</sup> Original: "indistintamente poblaciones no hispanoparlantes como los brasileños o bien los mismos latinos angloparlantes de Estados Unidos" (Scolari & Piñón, 2016, p. 15). Own translation in text.

exploring and further understanding the affinities and analogies of historical minorities as (post)colonial subjects” (p. 90).

From the Latino Studies approach, previous research focused on *Latinidad* has drawn attention to this concern. Findings show a complex and tense process where race, religion, color, gender, sexuality, class, language, nationalism, diversification, globalization, and immigration come together. We pay attention to the Mexican American feminist Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) to illustrate how language represents a type of transgression in Mexican-American borders:

Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself [. . .] Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate. (p. 81)

We want to argue the importance of Anzaldúa (1987) in this research since we can point out several similarities between her and Saracho. Both of them defend a border culture with an activist attitude represented in their works across the language, among other factors. As we will look at below, Saracho also uses a Spanish-English language as a cultural and linguistic symbol of resistance. Anzaldúa (1987) called Latina woman “the new mestiza” to represent the process in which “la mestiza is a product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another” (p. 78). Valdivia (2003) agrees on this hybrid approach since *Latinidad* depicts a transnational social group transcending race and ethnicity, where cultural influences and social hierarchies occur.

### ***Representation of Latinxs in American Fiction TV Series***

The Latino community constitutes an important population center in the United States, and it is forecasted that it will represent 28% of the U.S. population by 2060 (United States Census Bureau, 2018). However, traditionally “Latinos remained dramatically underrepresented compared to census figures” (Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005, p. 111). Moreover, they are usually characterized negatively. According to the study *Immigration Nation: Exploring Immigrant Portrayals on Television* (The Norman Lear Center Publications, 2018), immigrant characters are often less educated, poor, and associated with crime and incarceration. From a gender perspective, Latina females are usually represented as short, curvy, brown, and sexy women (Merskin, 2007). Latino male characters are often criminals, gardeners, Latin lovers, or comedians (Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005).

This limited and stereotyped representation of Latinx has existed since practically the beginning of the television media (Raab, 2014). We draw on six basic Latino stereotypes identified by Ramírez-Berg (2002), which could be mixed or slightly modified, to present examples of Latinx characters on classic and contemporary television. *El bandido* illustrates negative physical and psychological factors, such as dirtiness and violence. Classic *bandidos* are found in TV series as *Bonanza* (Dortort & Hamilton, 1959–1973). In contemporary TV series *el bandido* is often a drug runner: Guillermo Díaz (*Weeds*; Kohan, 2005–2012) or

Marco Salamanca (*Breaking Bad*; Gilligan, 2008–2013). The harlot is the female version of *el bandido*. She is lustful and passionate. We can find a kind of harlot in Gloria Delgado (*Modern Family*; Levitan & Lloyd, 2009–2020) or Gabrielle Solís (*Desperate Housewives*; Cherry, 2004–2012).

The male comic stereotype of the buffoon is noted in classic TV series, such as westerns—Sergeant García (*Zorro*; McCulley, 1957–1959)—and comedies—Ricky Ricardo (*I Love Lucy*; Arnaz, 1951–1957). We indicate the character George López (*George López*; Borden, Helford, & López, 2002–2007) as a contemporary example. The female clown neutralizes the screen Latina's sexuality. We can find a version of this humorous character in Lucy Ricardo (*I Love Lucy*; Arnaz, 1951–1957) and Betty Suárez (*Ugly Betty*; Horta, 2006–2010).

The Latin lover is known for his eroticism and the violence, which may lead to sexual tension, such as the case of Esteban Reyes (*Weeds*; Kohan, 2005–2012). The dark lady is also a Latin lover, but she is cold, virginal, and inscrutable. A contemporary incarnation of this stereotype is Jane Villanueva (*Jane the Virgin*; Urman, 2014–2019).

As we have seen, contemporary TV series still include Latino stereotypes, often used humorously to foster Latino self-irony. However, ethnicity is not always mentioned in these programs. Following this vein, Gina Rodriguez—lead actress in *Jane the Virgin* (Urman, 2014–2019)—values how this TV series manages cultural traits: "For once, I was reading a script where they weren't talking about my ethnicity. They weren't putting a Puerto Rican flag on my shoulder. They weren't putting a taco in my hand" (as cited in Barker & Jane, 2016, p. 421).

Ramírez-Berg (2002) also indicates how film studies and Latinx stars and filmmakers break the stereotype rules. Moreover, the consolidation of premium cable channels and the advent of streaming platforms have changed this situation during the post-network era. These outlets are characterized by their creative freedom, being niche-oriented, and their international distribution. There are several differences between basic and premium cable, primarily because of the financing system, which influences their business model. Subscribers' payments and advertisers support basic cable, and premium cable is funded solely by subscribers. For this reason, they offer extra, exclusive, and original content.

These channels do not have to follow the contents rules imposed by Federal Communication Commission (FCC) on networks. Regarding our subject of study, the FCC (1946) published Public Service Responsibility of Broadcast Licensees to promote media inclusion of underrepresented groups of citizens. Eventually, this Commission has had to apply more measures to increase minority access to media and ensure a plurality of narratives (Wible, 2004).

The premium cable channel creates a specific creative brand to offer their audience products worth paying for. Writer-producers working for HBO or Showtime have more significant creative implications during the creation and production of their programs. These TV series, such as *Game of Thrones* (Benioff & Weiss, 2011–2019) or *The L Word* (Abbott, Chaiken, & Greenberg, 2004–2009), are characterized by including amoral characters, controversial issues, film aesthetics, and narrative flexibility (Sepinwall, 2012). The production process in premium cable channels implies faster rhythm and a bigger budget, enabling them to

produce the entire season at once, albeit it is distributed weekly. Although these channels include some functions, such as pause, rewind, or record, the content is broadcast live. Cable channels offer these services for a concrete geographical zone, and they do not depend on the Internet connection.

Over-the-top (OTT) platforms acquire these production and content features, while they offer a catch-up TV service across the Internet. We note the relevance of Netflix service, which "represents the revolution, when quality serialized shows were first produced directly for Internet" (Douglas, 2015, p. 96). This service is widely known for creating original content to satisfy a heterogeneous audience around the world. Following the cited factors, this platform includes a production model called straight to series, which means there is an actual budget to produce the entire season and a pilot episode is unnecessary. This system reduces production times and cancellation risks. Spectators have the entire season of TV series at their disposal, so they watch it without waiting for weekly premieres, a practice called binge-watching (Matrix, 2014).

Returning to our subject of study, these outlets promote the inclusion of Latinxs in their TV shows and writers' rooms (Piñón & Rojas, 2011). We highlight premium cable channels such as Lifetime (*Devious Maids*; Cherry, 2013–2016) or Starz (*Vida*; Saracho, 2018–2020), and VOD services like Netflix, which produces Latino TV shows in English (*One Day at a Time*; Calderón Kellett & Royce, 2017–2020), Spanish (*La Casa de las Flores*; Caro, 2018–2020), and both languages (*Narcos*; Bernard, Brancato, & Miro, 2015–2017). Therefore, following Castañeda (2018): "The most productive intersection between Latinx representation and television will occur in this era of digitalization" (p. 477). The TV show chosen as a case study in this article depicts this since it is created and written by Latinx professionals in premium cable television.

### ***Latinx Professionals in the American Television Fiction Industry***

Latinxs' limited and stereotyped representation on American TV shows is due to social, cultural, and political factors and the small number of Latinx workers in the television business, both in writing and production (Chávez, 2015). Latinx showrunners and writers are probably the most appropriate professionals for creating these stories. Television writing has a personal influence on the final TV series. For this reason, the knowledge and background of Latinxs enable them to create realistic characters and plots about their own culture. Moreover, it is reasonable for Latinx showrunners to hire Latinx writers with whom they share experiences (Negrón-Muntaner et al., 2014). Writers' identity should not be the only requirement for taking part in a writers' room, but multicultural writers' rooms promote the TV series' authenticity, credibility, and diversity.

Previous studies (Dávila, 2012; Dávila & Rivero, 2014; Raab, 2014) have shown a direct correlation between these issues. Negrón-Muntaner et al. (2014) state that "the absence of Latino industry leaders is a key factor in the current marginalization of Latino talents and stories" (p. 20), and Ramón (2016) adds that "the creation of more roles for Latinas, by Latinxs, is the only effective way to diminish the existing stereotypes" (p. 31).

However, the presence of the Latino community is still limited during the production of TV series, in both creative profiles and leadership roles (Molina-Guzmán, 2018). The Writers Guild of America West (WGAW, 2019) sheds light on this through the *Inclusion Report Card for the 2017–2018 TV Staffing Season*, in which it states that “systemic discrimination against writers from historically underrepresented groups remains pervasive in the hiring of television writers” (p. 2).

This study notes that in the 2017–2018 staffing season, only 27% of 2,985 jobs in television writing were carried out by persons of color. Besides, the report shows that the number of Latinx writers is declining when their roles are more influential. Other findings obtained by the cited research present an improvement in the Latinxs’ situation in television media in the last decade since the number of writers of color has increased from 17% to 27%. An updated version of this report indicates a slight increase (1%) in the employment of persons of color, which corresponds to the general trend of increasing their inclusion in television over the last 10 years (WGAW, 2020).

This problem persists in the contemporary era. White male workers still dominate the television industry and Latinx professionals have to face market challenges to achieve a good representation of their community on screen. A representative example of this landscape is the Latino-themed cable television show *Resurrection Blvd.* (Leoni, 2000–2002). Executive producers hired a Latina/o creative team to counteract negative notions of Chicano masculinity (Holling, 2006). Moreover, this TV series has become a vehicle used by Latino advocacy groups to garner viewers’ support and increase Latino participation in the industry. *Resurrection Blvd.* (Leoni, 2000–2002) was part of the Showtime marketing campaign called “No Limits,” in which the ideal was “making it the first English-language drama series to feature Latinos both in front of and behind the camera” (Wible, 2004, p. 50).

The study of Latinx representation in the media is also noted in another paradigmatic case: *Ugly Betty* (Horta, 2006–2010). The adaptation of the Latin-American telenovela is illustrative of “the larger changes taking place within U.S. television industry, but also as the crucial intervention of Latina/o producer with their cultural and symbolic leverage to make the project possible” (Piñón, 2011, p. 392). This process was not easy or fluid, but it suffered several changes in professionals and routes. The first idea was to produce a non-Latino comedy. However, executive producers decided to create another kind of show and to hire a Latina/o creative team, which Piñón (2011) refers to as “cultural translators” (p. 394).

Cable channels and streaming services have provided more significant opportunities to this community: Gloria Calderón Kellett (*One Day at a Time*; Calderón Kellett & Royce, 2017–2020) or Dailyn Rodríguez (*Queen of the South*; Fortin & Miller, 2016–2021). There are also Latinx television professionals working in the Public Broadcasting Service: Cristela Alonzo (*Cristela*; Alonzo & Hench, 2014–2015), Jorge Ramírez-Martínez (*The Blacklist: Redemption*; Bokenkamp, Eisendrath, & Ordi, 2017), or Rafael Agustín (*Jane the Virgin*; Urman, 2014–2019). These examples not only show the inclusion of Latinx showrunners and writers in the media but also a not-negatively stereotyped representation of Latinx people (Grell, 2017). In this respect, Raab (2014) affirms that “we are seeing more frequent instances where the control over Latina/o presentation by non-Latinas/os changing to a control by Latina and Latino television makers” (p. 110). In summary, Castañeda (2018) expresses:

Rarely [Latinxs] are hired to be a part of the creative teams that produce the alternate realities and counter-narratives necessary for offsetting the negative perceptions of Latinos that currently dominate the U.S. and global imaginary. [However,] showrunners like Tanya Saracho are attempting to change this structural reality by hiring primarily Latinx writers for series' such as Starz's *Vida*. (p. 473)

For this reason, this showrunner and her writers' room deserve particular attention in the study of Latinx television workers since she is changing the former television landscape in the American industry.

### Objectives and Methodology

This research aims to study the representation of Latinx on American TV series, both on-screen and behind the cameras. Within this framework, a specific TV series is analyzed to understand the correlation between the work carried out by Latinx writers and showrunners and how they present characters and stories. The selected television project is a contemporary TV series that has been created by Tanya Saracho and broadcasted by Starz premium cable channel: *Vida* (Saracho, 2018–2020).

The study intends to answer two main research questions:

*RQ1: How are the Latinx writers and showrunner creatively involved during the *Vida* (Saracho, 2018–2020) TV series production from a personal perspective?*

*RQ2: How is Latinidad portrayed in *Vida* (Saracho, 2018–2020) through its narrative, thematic, and aesthetic features?*

With this objective in mind, a review of existing literature on the stereotyping and representation of Latinx characters in American television series was vital for this research. Besides, it was essential to consider some statistical analysis which provided insight into Latinx professionals' situation in U.S. media.

In his analysis of Latino stereotypes in films, Ramírez-Berg (2002) defends that the study of this representation is not just a content analysis. However, it must include a social and historical context and knowledge about cinematic techniques. We apply a model based on media production studies and television aesthetic theory in line with this strategy. The data is presented in two stages: (1) Television production context and (2) Aesthetic features of the TV series. Each section includes an appendix table with general information about the production process<sup>3</sup> and the content of the TV series.<sup>4</sup> These findings are analyzed in depth through different methodological techniques.

In the first instance, the paper adopts the methodology and focus of media production studies. Following this approach, the television text is studied considering the elements beyond the screen. A TV series is not just an aesthetic and textual product but it is also influenced by an institutional and business

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<sup>3</sup> Appendix Table 1. Television Production Process: <https://bit.ly/3C7ZQx6>

<sup>4</sup> Appendix Table 2. Aesthetic Features of the TV Series: <https://bit.ly/2Xhpsbq>

context (Caldwell, 2008). Therefore, media markers' experiences, practices, and interactions are considered for examining a specific television project.

To examine the TV series production process, we gather interviews with media professionals<sup>5</sup> and information surveys from the television trade press, websites, and social media (Newcomb & Lotz, 2002). The interview employs an ethnographic method often used to obtain data in media production studies (Caldwell, 2008) because it enables us to understand the production workers' practices and experiences (Bruun, 2016).

In-depth semi-structured interviews in English or Spanish are applied: following an essential guide with flexible questions and allowing and accepting new topics during the session. This guide organizes the questions in two main sections from a professional and personal perspective: (1) competencies and implications during the production process and (2) personal ideas and experiences as Latinx professionals. To analyze interviews, we recorded and transcribed the audios. Then, we examined answers paying particular attention to Latinx references from the interviewees. To do so, we classified their testimonies according to several key concepts that come from the literature review: "people of color," "Latinxs," "stereotype," "queer Latinas," "authentic," "White American," and "dominant culture." We have included these quotes in our results to achieve more comprehensive conclusions.

On the other hand, several researchers acknowledge a relationship between showrunners and their TV series, based on their creative tasks and responsibilities. Newcomb and Alley (1983) stated that many executive producers incorporate personal ideas into their television projects, influencing the television aesthetic. In this respect, despite the collaborative nature of the TV series' production process, the attribution of authorship to the showrunner is an appealing and debated issue in contemporary television studies (Mittell, 2015).

The second stage is based on Cardwell's proposal (2005): "a close analysis and critique of thematic, formal, and stylistic qualities present in a particular televisual sequence" (p. 180). At this point, the paper centers around distinctive features of the TV series: Latinx themes, language, and characters. The visualization of the program and the previous U.S. Latino framework allow us to further develop these elements in the second phase, where we analyze the first episode, which represents the project's central concept (Dunleavy, 2018).

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<sup>5</sup> Interviews were carried out with Tanya Saracho—showrunner—on January 13, 2019; Evangeline Ordaz—co-executive producer—on September 24, 2018; and Mando Alvarado—producer—on November 8, 2018. They signed informed consent forms to allow us to analyze and use their answers in the context of this research.

## TV Series' Analysis: *Vida* (Saracho, 2018–2020)

### *Television Production Context*

Tanya Saracho was born in Sinaloa, México, but she settled in Chicago (1998) to start as a playwright and dramaturge. She has written and produced a large number of plays at Dallas Theater Center or Victory Gardens Theater. Latinxs and women are the thematic elements at the core of her performances.

Saracho moved to Los Angeles (2012) to work writing TV series scripts. In this early stage of her television career, she was a member of the *How to Get Away with Murder* (Nowalk, 2014–2020) writers' room as the "diversity hire": "That means it was a funded position set aside for someone who'd bring quote diversity to the mostly White writers' room in question" (Betancourt, 2018, p. 3).

This experience enabled Saracho to be promoted to different roles until she reached the position of showrunner on the TV show *Vida* (Saracho, 2018–2020). She also attended the Showrunner Training Program offered by the Writers Guild of America in Los Angeles to improve her knowledge of the production side of a television project. The showrunner points out the small number of Latinx writers who took part in these courses during her attendance (T. Saracho, personal communication, January 13, 2019).

Saracho notes the set of competencies that she has to develop as a showrunner: "You are responsible for the macro-level concepts, but you also have to implement them. And that is where the administrative manager factor comes in"<sup>6</sup> (personal communication, January 13, 2019). Moreover, she also indicates her connection with the TV show's vision. In this sense, although *Vida* (Saracho, 2018–2020) is not an autobiographical project since Saracho does not have Mexican-American citizenship, she indeed identifies with this policy and culture, which is essential to create this show.

The opportunity of producing this TV series came from a proposal by Starz cable channel: "Starz took a chance on me [. . .] We're here. We have the talent and the resumes, but we need to be trusted and let in to the doors of Hollywood" (Saracho, as cited in Davis, 2018, p. 8). Executive Vice-President of Original Programming, Marta Fernández, met Saracho as she sought to create "a Latino-centric story about gentrification and gender identity, with a LA backdrop" (González, 2018, p. 36). During this meeting several ideas came up, but eventually, the TV project was inspired by a short story by Richard Villegas Jr. titled *Pour Vida*.

*Vida* (Saracho, 2018–2020) is part of Starz's diversification strategy, which consists of including new Spanish-language content and targeting underserved audiences (The Internet & Television Association [NCTA], 2017). In this vein, Carmi Zlotnik, Starz President of Programming until 2020, expressed:

It's about looking for stories that are inclusive, and that have meaningful and interesting themes in them [. . .] And when you talk about prioritizing diversity, one way is to make

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<sup>6</sup> Original: "Eres responsable de los conceptos en lo macro; pero también en realizarlo, y ahí es donde entra el factor de gerente administrativo" (comunicación personal, 13 enero, 2019). Own translation in text.

sure you have the right group of people in the executive office [. . .] We are looking at the Latino sector, which has real potential. (as cited in NCTA, 2017, p. 8)

Although episodes were released weekly on the linear premium cable channel, Starz also operates a video-on-demand television application: Starz On Demand, which arrived in Latin America in 2019 across Apple TV. Therefore, Starz has shown both technology and creative advance.

In January 2017, Starz gave the green light to the TV series, whose title was *Vida* (Saracho, 2018–2020)—which means “life” in Spanish—and Saracho became the first Latina showrunner in the premium cable space. She signed a three-year production deal to develop the three seasons. Fernández claimed that the key to reaching diversity on television is to provide opportunities for Latinx professionals, and this is the main differential of Starz. Therefore, “to create a series that felt Latinxs, they needed creatives who were Latinx” (Davis, 2018, p. 5).

The TV series’ production process is characterized by Saracho’s creative control and freedom to accurately represent the Latino community, both behind and in front of the camera. Fernández values Saracho’s Latino background and how it influences the TV series from a positive and inclusive point of view:

It was real; it was authentic. You can tell this wasn’t somebody on the outside looking in and making assumptions about what it means to be Latina, what it means to be queer, what it means to be the other. (Fernández, as cited in González, 2018, p. 38)

While composing the writers’ room, Saracho hired all Latinx writers. All of them were women, except one man and one nonbinary person. Hiring a diverse group of writers is essential to reach “many perspectives of Latinidad” (T. Saracho, personal communication, January 13, 2019). This is possible thanks to the combination of personal experiences and views told inside the room. It is the same with the queer factor: “The fact that about half of us in the room are queer, and we each have our own distinct story and narrative, that translates on screen,” adds the head writer Nancy Mejia (as cited in Davis, 2018, p. 12).

Starz cable channel knew the showrunner’s motivations and interests, as her previous projects illustrated, so network executives supported Saracho’s decisions. Following this vein, Evangeline Ordaz—co-executive producer—(2018) asserts: “The network executive is very supported on the show, the vision, the writers, and the showrunner [. . .] That somebody just trusts you, trusts your vision, trusts that you can create that vision, and lets you do that job” (personal communication, September 24, 2018). From the channel perspective, Zlotnik adds: “We want to become more of a talent magnet so that the creative community knows we are a great place to tell stories” (as cited in NCTA, 2017, p. 13).

However, Saracho received some comments from union members who recommended choosing the best writers for her writers’ room. She argued that it is essential that the writers’ room knows and shares the TV series’ culture, language, and identity. Each writer provides a different experience, but all of them are related to the TV show’s theme: U.S. Latinxs. The producer Mando Alvarado (2018) states: “Showrunners look for people who support them, can work in what they want to do, and deliver the

showrunner vision. But I also feel that a good showrunner understands what everyone is capable of doing and bringing" (personal communication, November 8, 2018).

Ordaz is primarily connected to the theme of this story: the process of gentrification or "*gentefication*"<sup>7</sup> in the neighborhood of Boyle Heights in East Los Angeles. She was born and lived part of her life in this zone. Moreover, she worked on several cases related to this problem as a lawyer before becoming a writer. Therefore, Ordaz draws on her personal experience and she brings it to the writers' room.

Concerning the production, Saracho emphasizes that she has an "all-female team": Most directors, editors, and cinematographers are Latina women. The showrunner highlights the casting director, Carmen Cuba, who allowed her access to Latinx and queer actresses. Likewise, Saracho expresses that *Vida* (Saracho, 2018–2020)—the second season—is the first TV show where all directors are Latina women. The showrunner points out the importance of having a perfect understanding of working alongside the director. For this reason, Saracho was on set all the time during the filmmaking and she directed some scenes (personal communication, January 13, 2019).

The showrunner's performance during the whole production process allows her to apply a "Latinx gaze," thanks to her personal experiences and creative implications. It is possible through the moral authorial identity of Saracho, which influences the analysis and interpretation of the TV series (Busse, 2013). In this sense, she has created a "really specific [TV series], and it is going to manage themes which have not been managed before"<sup>8</sup> (personal communication, January 13, 2019).

### ***Aesthetic Features of the TV Series***

*Vida* (Saracho, 2018–2020) is a "*dramedy*" that revolves around two Mexican-American sisters, Emma and Lyn, who have to go back to Boyle Heights—Eastside Los Angeles—after their mother's death. Returning to the place where these women spent their childhood involves meeting with old friends, dealing with their mother's death, and managing problems in the family business. Moreover, the sisters discover their mother's true sexual identity during the funeral: her roommate Eddy was her wife.

The central theme of this TV series is the gentrification of Latinx people in some neighborhoods in Los Angeles, which reminds us of the historical White domination. The matter is introduced by Marisol, a young activist who fights against this phenomenon on the Internet. This thematic line reveals injustice and feelings of rejection. Besides, this issue is used as a vehicle for addressing different topics like sexual, cultural, social, and racial identity from an intersectional approach. For example, the sisters discuss the sale

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<sup>7</sup> The word "gentrification" refers to the process where the original population from a zone is forced to leave their houses. It is due to buying and selling at a higher price, which they cannot pay because they are generally poor. Thus, people of higher buying power occupy the zone. The concept "gentefication" is a play on words between "gentrification" and "*gente*"—which means "people" in Spanish. This term is used to refer to Latino gentrification.

<sup>8</sup> Original: "Es una serie de televisión muy específica, donde se van a manejar temas que no se han manejado antes" (comunicación personal, 13 enero, 2019). Own translation in text.

of the family building and how it could harm undocumented tenants living there, when Lyn says: "What kind of Mexican would I be if I didn't care?" (Saracho & Ruizpalacios, 2018, 00:22:26–00:22:53).

*Vida* (Saracho, 2018–2020) presents Mexican-American society across the Latino culture and identity in the United States. It is noteworthy a Mexican restaurant scene where Emma orders tacos and we can see how food is prepared in detail (Saracho & Ruizpalacios, 2018, 00:21:12–00:21:16). We also note a big long shot of the neighborhood with Los Angeles downtown buildings at the back, which depicts the contrast between these two districts of the same town (Saracho & Ruizpalacios, 2018, 00:01:11–00:01:16).

However, the most representative element is the language: a blend of Spanish and English—*Spanglish*—which is used by Mexican-American people living in Los Angeles due to their proximity to Mexico (Rojas & Piñón, 2014): "Give me a *grito* if you need anything" (Saracho & Ruizpalacios, 2018, 00:06:03) or "This morning I say *basta!*" (Saracho & Ruizpalacios, 2018, 00:00:27). The TV series includes several Mexican expressions, such as "*pocho*," "*quiovole*," or "*carnala*" (Saracho & Ruizpalacios, 2018, 00:20:51–00:21:01), which are entirely new in the American television landscape. We also point out terms as "White Latina" or "*whitena*" (Saracho & Ruizpalacios, 2018, 00:25:32–00:25:35), which embody the complex hybridity in these Californian zones. With these concepts, this TV series comes up with discrimination inside the Latino community based on skin tone and the corresponding social hierarchy.

The inclusion of Spanish words in the English language has been considered a positive and creative innovation with rich advantages from a cultural perspective (Aparicio, 1994). This vocabulary reinforces the Latino identity as a sign of resistance to domination (Gutiérrez & Almaguer, 2016). However, we also note that sometimes Emma speaks without a Latino accent in the Spanish language from Spain, and she rejects some words that come from a so-called *Pocho Spanglish* used by her sister: "*watchala*" or "*parkear*" (Saracho & Ruizpalacios, 2018, 00:20:45–00:21:11).

This television project also includes another innovative theme in the contemporary era: queer culture. The TV series presents several queer characters, such as Emma or Eddy, breaking gender barriers. Saracho also identifies as a queer. It is a significant factor in the writing process that allows her to reach an authentic and rigorous representation of this identity. Similarly, *Vida* (Saracho, 2018–2020) is also a female and feminist TV show, which means that female main characters are prominent in unconventional plots.

The TV series shows a new perspective of this community in the United States. Its characters are not stereotyped; they live in an actual social situation. Following this idea, Saracho states: "[The main characters] are not the children of immigrants. They're the grandchildren of immigrants, and that's important too, because that's American" (as cited in González, 2018, p. 29). In the words of the actress Mishel Prada, *Vida* (Saracho, 2018–2020) is "not depicting us as maids or feisty stereotypes but real, three-dimensional, rich women with flaws and vulnerability" (as cited in Davis, 2018, p. 14).

The following table clarifies how the main characters in *Vida* (Saracho, 2018–2020) are not related to most stereotypes usually connected with the Latino community (Negrón-Muntaner et al., 2014).

**Table 1. Stereotypes of Latinx Characters in *Vida* (Saracho, 2018–2020).**

Characters	Stereotypes <sup>a</sup>														
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
Emma Hernández								x	x						
Lyn Hernández								x	x				x		x
Eddy Martínez						x		x	x		x	x			x
Marisol Sánchez				x	x	x		x	x	x					x

Note. Source: Authors.

<sup>a</sup> Latino Stereotypes: 1. Criminal, 2. Violent, 3. Incarceration, 4. Immigrant, 5. Poor, 6. Cheap labor, 7. Maid, 8. National referenced, 9. Cultural symbols, 10. Accent exaggerated, 11. Religious, 12. Kitchen, 13. Family-oriented, 14. Less educated, 15. Sexuality.

Ideas concerning national references and cultural symbols are the only stereotypes presented in all the characters examined. As an example, we note several tight shots and verbal references to too many fans offered for friends at the funeral, which is a Mexican custom (Saracho & Ruizpalacios, 2018, 00:03:12–00:03:52). On the other hand, it is difficult to find other stereotypes:

1. Emma is a successful lawyer in Chicago who is very focused on her career. She seems an aggressive businesswoman, but she is introverted and emotional: She is tearfully checking a message from her job (Saracho & Ruizpalacios, 2018, 00:01:50–00:03:00).

2. Lyn is a free spirit who loves doing yoga and eating vegan food. The younger sister is very sexual and sometimes she uses her body to get things from men: In a shot, Lyn tells her ex-boyfriend how sad she feels, and in the next shot, they are having sex (Saracho & Ruizpalacios, 2018, 00:14:20–00:15:43). It could be an inspiration of a mix between the harlot and the dark lady attitude.

3. Eddy represents the so-called *butch* lesbian, seen before in the character Big Boo (*Orange Is the New Black*; Kohan, 2013–2019). Although Eddy is presented as “the wife,” sometimes people reference her like a man (Saracho & Ruizpalacios, 2018, 00:12:00–00:12:30).

4. Marisol embodies the resistance to urban problems. She uses her blog as a weapon against White dominance, as we can see in the first scene of *Vida* (Saracho & Ruizpalacios, 2018, 00:00:05–00:01:00).

It is noteworthy the contrast of personalities between Emma and Lyn. Through these characters, Saracho represents the cultural, social, sexual, and racial variety in the Latina community and how different dynamics are articulated inside an “intra-ethnic” context. Emma depicts a higher social class. She left the neighborhood to study abroad, so that she lost her relationship with her family and her culture. Emma seems to be a cold, serious, and calculating person, who does not feel as though she is a true Mexican. Lyn looks more integrated into this community, and she expresses solidarity and concern about the urbanistic situation. Her way of dressing and speaking allows us to more easily connect this character with the rest of the neighborhood.

The TV series revolves around community, identity, and family. These topics are also depicted through the music, including representative Latinx artists who have a history and identity consistent with the TV show. Germaine Franco, the first Latina composer in the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, heads the TV series' music: "She just has a really great vision for the music of the show and really understands this world and these characters" (Hassan, 2018, p. 11).

### Discussion and Conclusions

Latinx people living in the United States present a series of particularities associated with cultural, sociological, political, racial, and historical factors, which configure the *Latinidad*. The television industry is responsible for showing the most accurate possible image of this community because of the influence of the media over the audience's perception of Latinx people. This is a complex task and the historical review brings to light a stereotyped underrepresentation of Latinx people on American TV series. The limited presence of Latinx showrunners and writers during the creation of the TV show is the leading cause of this circumstance. Therefore, the community of Latinx writers calls for more realistic television projects, where Latinx people are not stereotyped but where these characters are normalized. The results of this study indicate some exceptions to this general rule during the contemporary era when premium cable channels and streaming platforms offer more opportunities to Latinx professionals.

This is the case of *Vida* (Saracho, 2018–2020), where the support from Starz's executives was indispensable for producing a coherent and original Latinx-themed TV series. In our analysis, the interviews with the showrunner and two writers show that they play a crucial role in creating authentic Latinx characters and stories, thanks to their personal experiences. These professionals' identity, culture, and background are essential during the writing process in the writers' room to tell stories from a realistic viewpoint. After this, Saracho is present in the filmmaking, so she can choose the best shot and camera angle to transmit what she wants from the audiovisual language perspective. She also supervises the postproduction phase to make sure her vision is maintained, especially regarding music. For its part, the textual analysis allows us to note different ways of presenting *Latinidad* in *Vida* (Saracho, 2018–2020): *Spanglish* language, Mexican-American customs, or non-stereotyped characters. These factors mark a significant difference in the Latinx representation in primetime American television.

Furthermore, other components of Saracho's identity, such as feminism and queerness, are present in the production process and the TV series. In this case, she hired an almost entirely female team and some queer writers and actors. Likewise, these ideas are included in the plot, which shows female independence and queer issues weaved into the ethnic problem in Los Angeles. While some of the characters' behaviors or dialogues technically fall into some traditional stereotypes, they are an authentic and accurate representation of life in East Los Angeles.

All these features lead us to understand Saracho's personality and vital experience, as well as the autonomy provided her by Starz to supervise every phase of the production process with autonomy. A mix of Latinx identity and audiovisual knowledge met in this figure, together with the industrial landscape, makes this TV show possible. *Vida* (Saracho, 2018–2020) presents real problems suffered by real people in a drama TV series. It is an entirely new way of portraying the Latinx community in mainstream language television.

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