Breaking Stereotypes or Stereotypical Breakdowns?: Analyzing Television Casting Breakdowns for Latina Characters

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This study examines casting Breakdowns (character descriptions used by actors, agents, and casting directors) as a central factor influencing Latina representation on scripted television shows. Through a textual analysis of the Breakdowns for the January 2017–August 2017 casting season, this study analyzed the Breakdowns of 3,714 characters in 269 SAG-AFTRA television shows across 21 broadcast, cable, and streaming networks. The research demonstrates intersectional discrimination of Latina actors in television. While the Breakdowns' specification of race/ethnicity for characters would allow Latinas to be cast in 63.6% of female roles, in practice they are cast in 6.4% of female roles and 2.9% of all roles. Additional textual analysis of the Breakdowns' descriptive language highlights ongoing Latina stereotyping in television depictions. This study furthers media representation research by exposing the Breakdown text as a fundamental element contributing to and maintaining stereotypical portrayals and discriminatory casting in television.

Keywords: intersectionality, Latina representation, television, casting

In February 2018, the highly sought-after, renowned Los Angeles acting coach, Leslie Kahn, was recorded advising a novice actor of Armenian Jewish descent to change her name and ethnicity to increase her castability. The following statement was recorded and publicly shared by a student in Kahn's acting class:

> Fuck the Armenian, that's not going to help you. The Latin could actually get you interviews for representation. Just the fact that your name is Rosa Ramirez is gonna get you a meeting. . . . So you might try it. . . . Go to the Headshot Shop and tell them you're Latin. Wear something fucking red. Wear some fucking sparkly earrings. Change your goddamned name, and let's just do an experiment. . . . Just fucking come up with the most Latin name you can come up with, and I mean I don't know what we're going to do if they ask is she's really Latin. I don't know how we're going to handle that. . . . Aren't we allowed to change our names to whatever we want to change our names to? And she already looks it. So stop admitting to being a huge Jew. OK? That's not going to help you. Speaking as one, it's not going to help. As a Jew, it doesn't help. . . . .So just try it . . . and keep us posted, like the saga of Rosa Ramirez. (Kahn, as cited in Latino Rebels, 2018, para. 8)

This recording of Kahn's words spread virally among acting networks, prompting outrage (Barron, 2018; Latino Rebels, 2018). Kahn's problematic statement raises pertinent questions about the current politics of Latina representation in the entertainment industry: Is there a higher demand for Latina actors[2] due to greater casting opportunities? When seeking to cast a Latina actor, what are the expected physical and personality traits of the character she is to play? Representation, as it relates to the intersecting categories of gender and race/ethnicity in television media, is an instrumental component in negotiating societal ideologies, expectations, and norms (Fiske, 1987; Hall, 1996; Newcomb & Hirsch, 2000). Therefore, it is critical to consider the entertainment industry's own discourse concerning visibility and representation of gender and race/ethnicity as it directly results in produced media portrayals.

Throughout television's history, the medium has been considered a more gender and race inclusive space than film (albeit minimally) because of the niche market potential in female and minority audiences (Gray, 1995; Spigel, 1992). In contrast to several years of #Oscarssowhite backlash, the 2017 Emmys were largely praised by mainstream media outlets for their ostensible increase in diversity (France, 2017; Liao, 2017; Viruet, 2017), contributing to an impression that non-White actors would be in demand in the television industry (Wakeman, 2017). However, despite the self-congratulatory celebration for television's inclusivity optics, minority groups, specifically the Latina/o[3] community, remained overlooked in the year preceding Kahn's statement (Garcia, 2017). Furthermore, beyond the superficial politics and limited scope of Emmy recognition, recent research reflects a sustained lack of diverse representation in television. Data from the 2019 Hollywood Diversity Report (Hunt, Ramón, & Tran, 2019) determined that, "women and people of color (with the exception of Black men in broadcast and cable) remained underrepresented among all actors in . . . 2016–2017 television shows" (p. 20). And while broadly, "by 2018–2019, people of color reached proportionate representation in the broadcast scripted arena and were within striking distance in cable and digital" (Hunt & Ramón, 2020, p. 27), Latina/o/x representation was at only at 5.8% across all

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[2] "Latina actor" combines a gendered noun, "Latina," with a gender-neutral noun, "actor" that is used in research from The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media and the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative.

[3] The term "Latina/o" is used as an inclusive term (Molina-Guzmán, 2010) to refer to both men and women of "Latin American origin or descent" (Hayes-Bautista & Chapa, 1987, p. 61).

television platforms. The 2021 Netflix diversity audit also underpinned the ongoing prevalence of Latina/o underrepresentation (Alcorn, 2021; Smith et al., 2021).

Stemming from the current industry discourse precipitated by Kahn's incendiary comments, this article specifically will engage an intersectional lens (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013; Hancock, 2016) and focus on Latina visibility in television by examining how Latina characters are written, cast, and portrayed. The character Breakdown is a crucial, but often overlooked, element of communication that determines the casting and portrayal of gender and race/ethnicity.

The character Breakdown is a few lines of text that describes the physical and personality attributes of a character in every project that needs casting. Akin to job postings that describes necessary qualifications, the Breakdown articulates how an actor should look and act for any given role. The following are anonymized examples from this study's Breakdown samples:

> [Name of Character][4] Female, 20s. The edgy, attractive, slightly punk, confident make-up artist behind-the-scenes on a political talk show. She is not at all afraid to speak truth to power. PLEASE SUBMIT ALL ETHNICITIES.

> [MEXICAN MAN #1 & #2] [Late 40s–50s] These threatening Mexican men enter a Clinica Medica to find [Name of Character] alone. Solid, their faces and expressions conveying imminent ill intent. Not the good guys . . . NON SPEAKING but the director would like to use actors.

The Breakdowns also include information about the size of the role and the project, such as the network, production company, creative team, and pay scale.

In episodic television,[5] after the episode has been written, the script is sent to the project's casting department and they, in turn, send the script to the Breakdown Services. Breakdown Services, Ltd, "is recognized by the Casting Society of America (CSA) as a preferred online resource. As the primary distributor of casting Breakdowns, it is used by CSA Casting Directors throughout North America" (https://breakdownservices.com/). Founded by Gary Marsh in 1971, Breakdown Services, Ltd,[6] streamlined the communication process between casting directors and talent representatives by providing a single service that provided pertinent information about available roles (Kendt, 2005). Staff members at Breakdown Services read the script and write a brief summary of each character, including their look, age, personality, and main plot points (Butsch, 1995). While some of these descriptions are specified by the episodes' writers in the script itself, other information about the character is inferred from the plot and

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[4] The characters' names have been removed to anonymize the Breakdown examples.

[5] This is true for all projects that cast actors (film, TV, new media, theater, commercials, industrials; Kendt, 2005).

[6] Until recently, Breakdown Services was the primary source for character Breakdown distribution. In 2017 this was challenged by 20th Century Fox's decision to "drop Breakdowns and replace it with Casting Networks, a primarily commercial casting service known by its operating brand LA Casting" (Andreeva, 2017, para. 1).

dialogue. Breakdown Services endeavors to write each Breakdown "with a maximum of objectivity and a minimum of subjectivity" (Kendt, 2005, p. v). However, it is still left to individuals employed by Breakdown Services to choose the "objective" words in the character description. Once the Breakdown is written, the casting department makes any needed adjustments to the Breakdown text, potentially adding their own interpretation, and then posts it on Breakdown Services for agents' and managers' online access (Kendt, 2005). Subsequently, talent representatives[7] digitally submit[8] their clients, who fit the character Breakdowns, for consideration through the Breakdown Services' portal called Breakdown Express.[9] Casting personnel review these submissions on Breakdown Express via a thumbnail-sized photo of the actors' headshot, a link to their reel, and a possible pitch line from the agent/manager. When the casting directors determine their top actor choices,[10] they notify the talent representatives and schedule auditions. Lastly, the actor receives their appointment time and the "sides" (a brief portion of the script for the audition) with the same character previously released by Breakdown Services and the casting director. With typically only a small section of the script available to the actor, the character Breakdown is the actor's primary tool for understanding the role for which they are auditioning. Thus, this single, character Breakdown, which is created and distributed by the sole resource, Breakdown Services (with a corner on the market), is the central text used by all parties to determine who to submit, how to act, and ultimately, who to cast.

While producers and/or writers can shape character representation (Butsch, 1995) in entertainment media, the Breakdown descriptions are an integral facet of varied visibility and portrayals of identity. A careful examination and analysis of the Breakdown texts opens an overlooked approach to media representation discourse. Precipitated by the advice given by Kahn to her student (to change her name and clothing to reflect a Latina heritage), the following questions will be explored in this study: Do Latina actors truly have an advantageous edge to being hired for television roles; furthermore, when Latina actors are requested for a role, what are the characters' expected physical, professional, and emotional traits as described by the character Breakdowns?

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[7] Only certified agents and managers can access Breakdown Services' online resource: Breakdown Express. The casting director can choose to release the Breakdowns directly to actors through the Actors' Access portal—a paid service for actors to submit themselves (without representation) for projects. Most Breakdowns for SAG-AFTRA television are not released on Actors' Access, and therefore are only accessible to accredited Agents and Managers through Breakdown Express.

[8] Paradoxically, every project listed in the Breakdowns includes the following statement: "We are committed to diverse, inclusive casting. For every role, please submit qualified performers, without regard to disability, race and ethnicity, age, color, national origin, or any other basis prohibited by law unless otherwise specifically indicated." That said, many Breakdowns clearly do specify the race/ethnicity, age, gender, and so forth, of a role.

[9] Other casting resources operated by Breakdown Services are Actors Access, Extras Access, Reality Access, Showfax, and CastingAbout (Kendt, 2005; Kroon, 2014).

[10] Casting directors may reach out directly to the agents and managers of talent they might potentially cast without waiting for an agent/manager submission through Breakdown Express (Kendt, 2005).

Casting from TV Breakdowns: Character Types, Occupations, and Race/Ethnicity

Given the importance of casting in shaping media representations, there are surprisingly few studies that explore television's casting Breakdowns. Two foundational casting studies conducted by Turow (1978, 1980) centered on character Breakdowns from an earlier broadcast era. Turow (1978) focused on facial and body image descriptors in the Breakdowns. Interviews with casting directors revealed that credibility (regarding viewers' expectations of type) and visual balance were the decisive factors informing casting choices. Additionally, Turow explored the way casting directors referenced "beautiful people," "real people," and "street people" as descriptions for the types of physical looks they require of the actors they are casting to fit the show (Turow, 1978, p. 21).

In terms of the characters' occupation outlined in the Breakdowns, 77%–84% of male characters had an occupation specified, whereas only 48% of female characters were associated with an occupation (Turow, 1980). A study for The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media documented gender representations in the workforce in popular television shows (Smith, Choueiti, Prescott, & Pieper, 2012, p. 18). The study did not consider the Breakdown texts, but instead looked at the produced content. However, it can be expected that these character occupations were outlined in the original character Breakdowns. A significant finding was that gender influenced occupations; male characters were shown on-screen to be at work, or acknowledged as part of the workforce, more regularly than were female characters. Women comprised 34.4% of employed characters in prime-time television shows. Comparatively, in the real world U.S. labor market, women 16 years and older comprised a total of 47% of employed individuals (Smith et al., 2012). Male characters held the majority of high-powered industry positions (CEOs/lawyers), and in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and math, the ratio of men to women was 3.73 to 1 in prime-time shows and 8 to 1 in children's shows (Smith et al., 2012).

In his 1980 study, Turow analyzed 824 character Breakdowns across 144 prime-time crime drama episodes. From these Breakdowns, he documented mentions of objective traits, such as age, race, and gender. Turow (1980) determined that 99% of the character Breakdowns specified gender. Turow (1980) found that race (Black or Asian) was mentioned for only 7% of the characters. Turow attributes this finding to the pattern observed in his 1978 study: When a character's race is not indicated it is presumed White by default. The frequency of when gender and race is specified in the casting Breakdowns opens an interesting legal debate which Robinson (2007) explores. In an article for the *California Law Review*, Robinson (2007) questions the legality of race and gender qualifications in casting Breakdowns as it stands in direct opposition to Title VII, which prohibits job postings from expressing sex and racial preferences. He poses that the regulations that ban discriminatory hiring practices based on impermissible factors such as race and gender stand in direct contradiction to casting Breakdowns that require actors of a stated race and gender. The First Amendment law, which protects artistic freedom, is responsible for validating the casting Breakdowns' discriminatory practices. Robinson (2007) explains:

> When viewed through the lens of artistic freedom, casting announcements parroting the scripts' sex and race preferences may strike us as reasonable and unoffensive. But when we place them in context of employment discrimination law, we can see the highly anomalous and problematic nature of such practices. (p. 2)

Robinson (2007) proposed solution favors Title VII and believes that only in cases "where a ban would impose a substantial burden on the narrative" (p. 4) should race and gender qualifications be allowed in the character Breakdowns. However, this result would have to grapple with a separate set of issues as this proposal lends itself to a colorblind or genderblind casting approach.

Colorblind casting is a term used to describe a casting process that is devoid of racial/ethnic specificity—any actor can play any role regardless of their race/ethnicity. Warner (2015) explains that colorblind casting, which is sometimes referred to as blindcasting, "became a useful tool because it allowed showrunners and television writers to avoid explicitly writing race into the script with the confidence such actions could create equal opportunity for actors of diverse background" (Warner, 2015, p. 12). This is precisely the goal Robinson (2007) sets forth in his critique of raced and gendered Breakdowns. However, Warner (2015) demonstrates in her analysis that ignoring race does not create the intended equal playing field. For Warner (2015), the neutralization of race specificity privileges "normative (White) assumptions" (p. 12). This means that the characters are written as White and are potentially cast to be played by non-White actors. The dangers of this are twofold: Colorblind casting "stunts and displaces the many different cultural specifies embodied by persons of visible difference, as well as leaving them vulnerable to unconsidered stereotypical regressions" (Warner, 2015, p. 25). This is to say, when a character is written for a specific race, their racialized histories, experiences, and relationships have the potential to aid in developing a dynamic and truthful visibility. Some characters' traits and personalities would not fall into a stereotype if played by an actor of one race but would read as regressive or offensive if played by an actor of a different race. Not accounting for the racial stereotypes within media history can have unintended, harmful consequences.

Traditionally, fictional characters follow patterns and behaviors of anticipated traits and prescribed archetypes that stem from a history of storytelling (Adorno, 1954). Adorno's (1954) early analysis of television stereotypes gives context to the way audiences customarily expected television characters to operate within the environment of certain genres. Fiske (1987) expanded on audience perceptions of stereotypes and considered television as a site for audiences to make meanings and have expectations for characters' types, actions, and behaviors. The notion of type, and therefore typecasting, is an important determinant of the character Breakdowns. Zuckerman, Kim, Ukanwa, and von Rittmann (2003) found that for noncelebrity actors, it was more advantageous to their initial career success to present themselves as a clear type, rather than a complex/oppositional type that would be more challenging for casting directors to place. This has often been the case for non-White actors needing work who are not afforded the privilege to turn down roles that perpetuate a stereotype (Fleishman, 2016). However, this specificity of character type ultimately can hinder opportunities for career growth in roles outside of the actor's presented type (Zuckerman et al., 2003) and contribute to regressive representations (Pimpare, 2017; Warner, 2015). Butsch (1995) argues that the continuation of normative character behavior and typecasting (based on race and/or gender) in television arises from the time crunch of episodic television. He states, "producers [and] casting directors freely admit to stereotyping but argue its necessity on the basis of time and dramatic constraints" (Butsch, 1995, p. 409). However, regardless of the thought and/or time dedicated to the process, casting decisions from Breakdown text lead to choices about how and when stereotypes are either upheld or challenged in television programming, which ultimately affects society's understandings of identity (Hall, 2013).

Latina Intersectionality on Casting Breakdowns

The concept of intersectionality, named by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), is a central framework grounding this study as we see how the intersection of race and gender impact Latina representation in television. Originally operationalized as a way to articulate the way multiple layers of oppression affecting Black women, both as people of color *and* women, intersectionality was identified by Crenshaw (1991) in legal theory to describe employment discrimination against Black women. While antidiscrimination law, hiring initiatives, and advocacy groups might focus on race *or* gender, Black women are often obfuscated by the inclusion of Black men and/or White women. With this understanding, intersectionality has been used by scholars to bring awareness to interlocking systems of power that create distinctive experiences for those whose identities encapsulate multiple categories of difference that expand beyond race and gender and legal doctrine (Anderson, 1996; Cho et al., 2013; Collins, 2015; Hancock, 2016). That said, intersectionality is not an "additive theory of personal identity" wherein it is understood as "the presence of one marginalized identity in addition to another . . . and mislocating it strictly at the level of personal identity rather than including the social-structural" (Gipson, Corry, & Noble, 2021, p. 31). Intersectionality is a paradigm that centers the experience of those who face multiple, simultaneous discriminatory actions and challenges due to social structures that ignore the complexity of how layered, marginalized identities interact. In this study, intersectionality plays a key role in how and when Latinas are cast in television; their positionality as women *and* Latin intersect.

Centering the Latina intersectional experience, Hancock (2016) sheds light on the various uses of intersectional theory and its development in Chicana[11] studies. Zinn and Zambrana (2019) trace the history of Latina intersectional feminist thought from its roots in Black feminist theory through Chicana scholars whose "long-standing use of intersectional frameworks [are used] to understand Chicana experiences and struggles" (Zinn & Zambrana, 2019, p. 680). However, Zinn and Zambrana note that Latina intersectional feminist thought has remained largely within its own field and is not substantially visible within the broader context of intersectional feminism. This research project answers their call to fill a gap by engaging with the interdisciplinarity of an intersectional approach to highlight what Latina visibility and hiring practices look like in television Breakdowns.

The work from Robinson (2007) and Warner (2015), discussed in the previous section regarding the Breakdowns, becomes even more nuanced when we add an intersectional lens to address Latina characters. Robinson (2007) contends that "although race and sex can limit employment opportunity at many stages of the process, the evidence of such discrimination is most overt . . . when the decision makers use discriminatory breakdowns" (p. 13). To clarify, when one is auditioning for a role, one's sex and/or race can render them not the right fit for a particular part even if the Breakdown is open to any sex and/or race. However, if the Breakdown is discriminatory by specifying a sex and/or race, then actors who do not fit that description are not even in the pool for consideration. This is how the Latina experience in casting can be understood as intersectional. For an actor to be intentionally considered for a role, a Breakdown must be written specifically for one's sex and race/ethnicity—female *and* Latin. Breakdowns that might be written for

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[11] Zinn and Zambrana (2019) "use the term Chicana when referring to U.S. women of Mexican descent, Mexican origin, and Mexican ancestry" (p. 678).

women might not be looking for Latinas. Breakdowns that might be written for Latinos might not be written for women. Nondiscriminatory Breakdowns, those that do not specify sex and/or race, have the potential to neglect Latinas entirely. If a Latina is cast from a nondiscriminatory Breakdown, "the part many times does not allow for cultural specificity, relegating the minority actor to a normative white viewpoint" (Warner, 2015, p. 16). While this paradoxical conundrum can be argued for many underrepresented groups, and intersectional discrimination is present for many people represented by interlocking categories of difference, examining its distinct effect on Latinas is significant because of the complexity of their gendered ethnic identity in U.S. media (Valdivia, 2010) and the general industry sentiment that prompted Kahn's comments.

Latina Representation in Entertainment Media

In conjunction to intersectionality's effect on Latinas through the casting process, it is integral to consider and present the background and state of Latina representation in U.S. media. The perception of Latina representation not only affects industry attitudes and actions—critically determining power relations (Dryer, 1993)—but considering the historic and ongoing tensions concerning borders and immigration, the state of Latina representation for a U.S. market is replete with gravitas (Anzaldúa, 1987; Cepeda, 2020; Ngai, 2004; Valdivia, 2010).

A familiar and limited Latina stereotype has been pervasive since Hollywood's inception (Berg, 1990; Noriega, 1997; Ovalle, 2011). Kahn's advice to a beginning actor to falsely represent herself as Latina by wearing red and donning sparkly earrings harkens to a seemingly bygone era in casting when "racially and ethnically specific characters were usually considered stock characters—or 'types' that actors might portray—provided their impersonations displayed the expected physical, vocal, and visual techniques of racial mimicry" (Herrera, 2015, p. 59). This is to say that the actor's actual ethnicity was inconsequential, so long as they could "pass" visually and act accordingly.

Regarding contemporary representations of Latinas in U.S. media culture, Molina-Guzmán (2010) underpins the necessity to explicate the prevalent homogenization of a gendered Latinidad. Broadly, Latinidad "refers to a shared sense of a 'Latino' identity" that is rooted in experiences shaped by "European colonialism and U.S. imperialism in the social, political, and economic histories of the hemisphere; cultural, religious, and linguistic traditions; and experiences of racialization and stigmatization in the United States" (Dúa, 2005, para 1). Popular media entertainment and marketing advertisements contribute to Latinidad's prevalence (Molina-Guzmán & Valdivia, 2004), but also Latinidad is "embraced by Latina/o audiences as an opportunity to explore shared and divergent subjectivities" (Molina-Guzmán, 2010, p. 3). The conflation of all Latin cultures into a single, recognizable, Latinidad extends beyond just external, commercial forces; it is accepted, internalized, and performed by those looking to share cross-cultural Latin identities "within and across Latina/o national groups [through] actual and perceived difference and similarities among Latins from various national, economic, and social backgrounds" (Molina-Guzmán, 2010, pp. 3–4). Latina/os relationship to Latinidad, is a negotiated one that combines both a celebratory and critical view (Dúa, 2005; Moran, 2015).

One of the issues regarding Latinidad in U.S. media, is that it is an umbrella term which erases the individuality of Latin American countries and assumes a generic sameness across borders. In particular, "Latinidad in U.S. popular culture has been encoded via mass media–generated images and representations

where a monotonous 'Latin look' and 'Latin sound' tend to predominate what constitutes a Latina or Latino in mainstream . . . media outlets" (Dúa, 2005, para. 6). This homogenization in media contributes to Hollywood's conflation of distinctive Latina American experiences with U.S. Latinidad and leads to generalization in how Latina characters are described in Breakdowns and cast. Specifically, as it relates to women, Molina-Guzmán (2010) identifies this as symbolic colonization; "ethnic and racial ambiguity and sexualized Latina exoticness are equally central to media industry efforts to use multicultural accents to sell products and programming to global audiences" (p. 6). Molina-Guzmán (2010) cites the color red (one of Kahn's suggestions to the young actor) as a signifier for Latin culture in mass media. Symbolic colonization perpetuates assumptions and expectations of Latina depictions. Images of the Latina as a criminal (Beltrán, 2016; Bender, 2003), as overly sexual (Mendible, 2007; Valdivia, 2010), a bombastic spitfire (Herrera, 2015), or a motherly caretaker (Beltrán, 2016; Latorre & Mitchell, 2006) are examples of Latina stereotypes in television and also of symbolic colonization. These depictions are specific to Latinas in that they are a manifestation of a raced and gendered stereotype. This is an important aspect of a gendered Latinidad that correlates to how Latinas are described in the Breakdowns; conversely, when they are considered for roles that are not written for Latinas, but are open to any race/ethnicity, these assumptions can still prevail. As Herrera (2015) states, "stereotypes seem to be impervious to all efforts to extinguish them—always winning, somehow surviving, ever ready to manifest another day" (p. 138).

In terms of occupations, Latinas tend to appear as "secondary characters playing nurses, maids, and nannies" (Molina-Guzmán, 2010, p. 151). Other supporting roles they often populate are "useful witnesses or sympathetic crime victims" (Molina-Guzmán, 2010, p. 151). Conversely, when shows do branch away from these mediated stereotypes, it is considered a symbolic rupture (Molina-Guzmán, 2010). This symbolic rupture started to make an appearance on television in the late 1990s. For example, "shows such as 'CSI,' 'Without a Trace,' 'Law and Order,' and 'Grey's Anatomy' incorporated secondary Latina characters into their story lines as doctors, scientists, lawyers, and other professionals" (Molina-Guzmán, 2010, p. 176). However, these instances of symbolic ruptures did not occur as central plotlines but as supportive material.

Notably, in simple numerical terms, Latina characters have appeared in numbers far below their share of the U.S. population—9% according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2020). Hunt, Ramón, Tran, Sargent, and Roychoudhury (2018; Hunt et al., 2019) determined that for both the 2015–16 and 2016–17 seasons of broadcast, cable, and digital scripted shows, Latinas comprised 2.9% of all roles, and for the 2018–19 season, 2.6% of all roles (Hunt & Ramón, 2020). This is a miniscule growth in visibility from the 2000–01 primetime season where Latinas comprised 2% of roles (Molina-Guzmán, 2010). Beltrán (2016) contends that over the past two decades, this minor growth is likely due to demographic shifts within the U.S. audience market. However, despite growth in representational numbers in an occasional break from stereotypes, "a continuation of earlier patterns of marginalization and ambivalence can also still be felt" (Beltrán, 2016, p. 29).

Methodology

I conducted an analysis of casting Breakdowns from January 2017–August 2017.[12] These Breakdowns included character descriptions for theater, television, film, commercials, and Web series. I narrowed the scope of this study to episodic, SAG-AFTRA[13] scripted television programming (including network, cable, and digital streaming platforms) from January 2017 through August 2017. I disaggregated the information listed in each Breakdown by the character's gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, and ability (if given). Additionally, I notated the television program/network for which each Breakdown was written.

I identified the Breakdowns for female characters under the categories of Latina, Open Ethnicity, and no ethnicity specification. For the Breakdowns specifically seeking Latina actors, I noted the character's occupation/title (if given), physical traits (if given), and personality traits (if given). These categories were selected based on previous research concerning Latina visibility in media (Herrera, 2015; Molina-Guzmán, 2010). For comparison, I also noted characters' occupation/role (if given), physical traits (if given), and personality traits (if given) in Breakdowns specifically written for White women.

Results

The 3,714 character Breakdowns of 269 television shows, across 21 networks/platforms from January 2017–August 2017 resulted in the following role frequency demographics.[14]

Gender

Figure 1 shows the gender distribution in the Breakdowns as Men 57.6% (*n* = 2,141), Women 37.9% (*n* = 1,408), Open Gender[15] 4.4% (*n* = 165); Gender Queer/Nonbinary 0.1% (*n* = 6).

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[12] I was granted access to the January 2017–August 2017 Breakdowns through an anonymous industry source.

[13] This study examines English language television shows. While Telemundo is in negotiations with SAG-AFTRA (McNary, 2018), Telemundo characters are not currently included in the main Breakdowns distributed to LA and NY agents and managers.

[14] The categorization titles/words used to describe gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, and ability, are the ones given and identified by the Breakdowns.

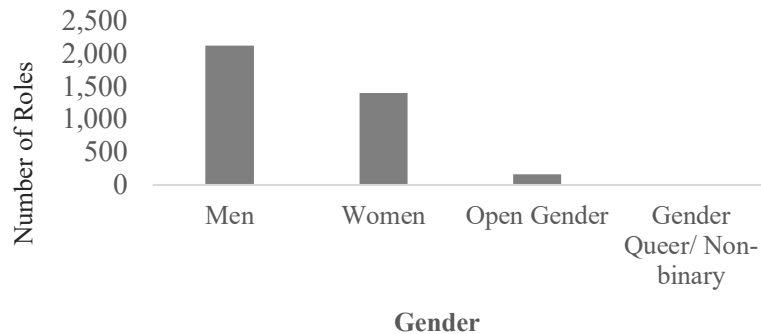[15] Open Gender means casting is open to either a man or woman in the role.

Figure 1. Casting Breakdowns' gender distribution.

Race/Ethnicity

Figure 2 shows the race/ethnicity of the Breakdowns as White 15.5% (*n* = 577), Black 8.5% (*n* = 316), Asian 3.8% (*n* = 144), Indian/South East Asian 1.5% (*n* = 59), Latina/o 8.3% (*n* = 309), Native American 0.5% (*n* = 20), Middle Eastern 1.6% (*n* = 62), Pacific Islander 0.7% (*n* = 28), Mixed Race/Biracial 1.4% (*n* = 52), No Ethnicity Given 30% (*n* = 1,115), Open Ethnicity[16] 33.9% (*n* = 1,260).
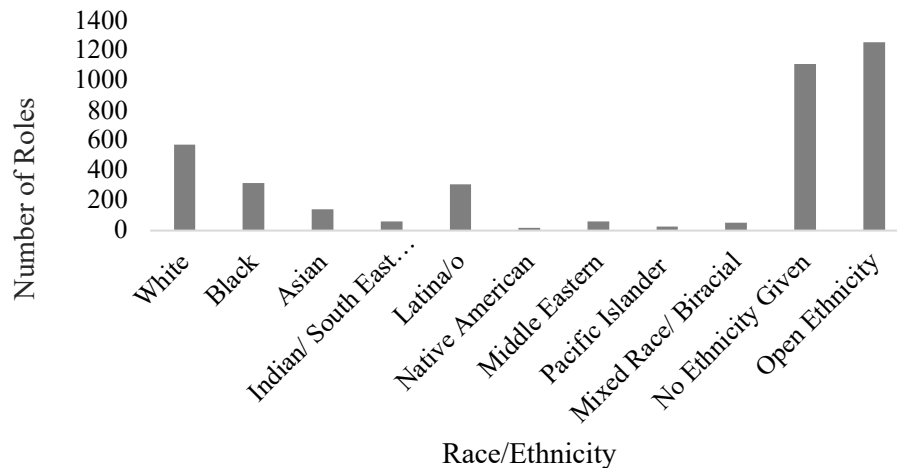

Figure 2. Casting Breakdown's race/ethnicity distribution.

Latinas

Of the available roles for female actors (*n* = 1,408), 8.3% of these Breakdowns called for a Latina character or other ethnicity/race (*n* = 117). For example, a Breakdown might indicate "Latina or Asian,"

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[16] Open Ethnicity refers to a note in some Breakdowns that say "please submit all ethnicities."

"Caucasian or Hispanic," "seeking diversity, African American, Latino, Asian, etc." In terms of the roles written exclusively for Latina characters, the percentage drops to 5.5% ($n = 78$). This includes instances where the Breakdown specified a "Hispanic" actress, but was looking for anyone of Latin American Heritage. There were instances ($n = 368$) when no ethnicity was specified in the Breakdown. This occurred for 26.1% of the Breakdowns for female characters. 34.3% of Breakdowns for female characters stated "open ethnicity" ($n = 483$). Therefore, Latina actors have had an opportunity to be considered for 60.4% of all available female roles. Figure 3 shows the distribution of race/ethnicity categories in which Latinas had an opportunity to be cast. Of the 269 television programs included in this study, 73 television programs specified Latinas in their Breakdowns. Breakdowns listed for Latinas only occurred across 43 programs (one to four characters per program), Latina or other ethnicity for 29 programs (one to five characters per program), and 51 programs had Breakdowns for both Latinas only and Latina or other ethnicity (one to seven characters per program). This spread shows that the data is not skewed by just a handful of Latina centered shows, but is relatively consistent across a range of programs. There were no gay, bi, or disabled Latina characters. There were three transgender Latina roles. All three Breakdowns for transgender Latinas were listed for the pilot of one show.
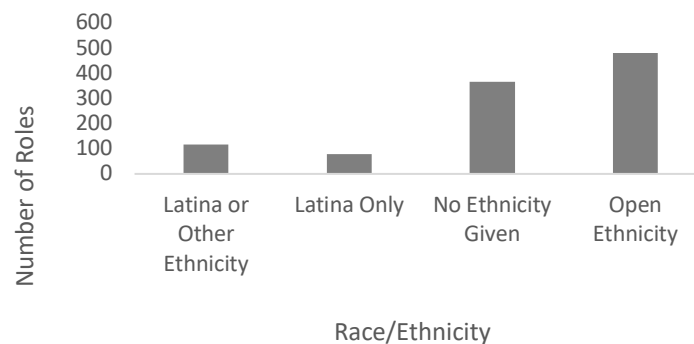

Figure 3. Casting Breakdown role distribution according to categories that include Latinas.

Descriptives

Figure 4 displays the percentage of the most frequently occurring descriptive in each category (occupations/titles, physical descriptions, and personality traits) in the Breakdowns written for Latinas compared with Breakdowns written for White women. Analysis of the Latina-only character Breakdowns ($n = 78$) yielded the following results: The most frequently listed occupations/roles for Latina characters were caretakers such as: "mother," "grandmother," "nanny," or "nun." These caretaker occupations/titles occurred across 36% of Breakdowns for Latinas. In contrast, these same occupations/roles occurred across 17.9% of Breakdowns for White women ($n = 217$). Fifty percent of Latina mothers were designated as single-moms while 11% of White mothers were designated as single-moms. Other frequently occurring occupation/designation for Latinas included a male's companion, such as "wife of," "ex-wife of," "mistress of," or "girlfriend of"; a service job, such as "housekeeper," "waitress," or "cafeteria lady"; a criminal such as "convict," "cartel wife," or "assassin"; and a professional, such as "detective," "flight director," "doctor," or "professor."
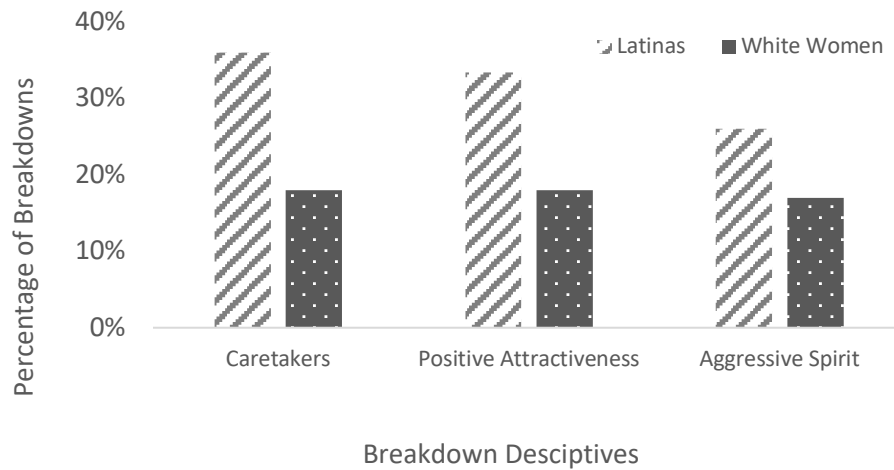
Figure 4. Percentage of most frequent descriptives in Breakdowns for Latinas compared with Breakdowns for White women.

Regarding physical traits, the most frequently occurring descriptives related to positive attractiveness included adjectives such as "sexy," "gorgeous," "beautiful," and "stunning." These words occurred across 33.4% of Breakdowns for Latinas and 17.5% of Breakdowns for White women.

In terms of personality traits, the most prevalent descriptives referenced an aggressive spirit. The most frequently appearing words of this manner were adjectives such as "spitfire," "dangerous," "bombastic," "tough," "manipulative," "competitive," "controlling," "angry," or "ferocious." These types of words appeared in 25.6% of the character breakdowns for Latinas, whereas these same words indicating an aggressive spirit appeared across 16.6% of character Breakdowns for White women.

Analysis and Discussion

Famed acting coach Leslie Kahn ignited a debate among actors within the entertainment industry when she suggested that a Jewish Armenian actor change her name to Rosa Ramirez and pose as a Latina because Kahn believed it would give the actor greater opportunities with industry casting professionals. This study critically examined character Breakdowns to determine whether any casting advantage exists for Latina actors in television in terms of casting frequency; and when Latinas are sought for a role, what does it mean to be a Latina character according the Breakdown description? The findings confirm Kahn's perception as false; the number of Breakdowns seeking a Latina actor or Latina/other ethnicity are minimal. When a Breakdown does call for a Latina character, the Breakdown descriptions fall into racialized and gendered Latina stereotypes. Analysis of these Breakdown descriptives, such as occupation/designation, physicality, and personality, highlights the ways in which Latina stereotypes are not only still prevalent, but often are applied as a condition for casting an actor to play a Latina role. The following discussion section will analyze the implications of these results.

Prevalence of Latina Characters in Casting Breakdowns

The status of Latina character representation is the result of intersectional discrimination (Crenshaw, 1991); conditions to be cast detailed in the Breakdowns, such as gender and race/ethnicity create a double-edged hiring challenge. From the onset, female actors have had fewer opportunities to be cast, as only 37.9% of all characters in the January 2017–August 2017 Breakdowns were written for women. Only 4.4% of characters in the Breakdowns were open to either men or women. Thus, the Breakdowns offered the opportunity for women to be cast in 42.3%, which is less than half of all roles.

Adding race as an additional category of difference drops the percentage of available roles even further. Just 8.3% (n = 309) of roles were written for Latina/o characters, both men and women, despite the fact that the Latina/o portion of the U.S. population is around 18%. Looking at the ratio of roles written for Latinas (n = 117) in comparison to Latinos (n = 192), the percentage mirrored that of all female characters compared with all male characters. Thus, only 37.9% of Latina/o characters were available to women, and only 3.2% of all roles were written specifically for Latina characters. Further, this number comprised instances in the Breakdowns where other ethnicities as well as Latinas were included as potential options. For example, some Breakdowns sought Latina, Black, or Asian actors for a role, or any other combination therein. The proportion of characters written exclusively for Latinas was 2.1%. These figures demonstrate how the intersecting disadvantages of race and gender create a hiring challenge for Latinas in television.

Another interesting layer emerges when exploring two additional ways in which race is expressed in the Breakdowns. Instead of specifying race/ethnicity, 33.9% of the Breakdowns state "open ethnicity." This terminology in the Breakdowns means the race/ethnicity of the character does not impact the narrative, and agents and managers are free to submit whomever they like for the role, and casting directors have the option to cast beyond the constraints of race. The other way the Breakdowns reference race/ethnicity was to ignore it entirely. For 30% of the character Breakdowns, there was no mention of race/ethnicity. The "open ethnicity" denotation and omitting any reference to race/ethnicity both follow Robinson's (2007) proposal of nondiscriminatory breakdowns and fall under Warner's (2015) description of blindcasting. When taking gender into account, and only considering roles for women, 34.3% of Breakdowns for female characters were "open ethnicity" and 26.1% of Breakdowns for female characters had no mention of race. This means that Latinas had the opportunity to be considered for these roles—thus, Latinas had the potential to be cast in 63.6% of all available roles for women. However, opportunity, based on the Breakdown text, does not determine outcomes. It is the producers, casting directors, agents, and managers who were responsible for the actual number of Latinas characters cast. The 2019 Hollywood Diversity Report, which documented the race and gender of characters on produced television shows, found that Latinas were cast in 2.9% of all television roles (Hunt et al., 2019). This percentage falls in between those for Latinas or other ethnicity (3.2%) and Latinas only (2.1%) as specified in the Breakdowns. When considering gender, the Hollywood Diversity Report concluded that Latinas were cast in 6.4% of all female roles (Hunt et al., 2019). Again, this percentage falls in between those for Latinas or other ethnicity (8.3%) and Latinas only (5.5%) of all female roles as specified by the Breakdowns. This means Latinas are being cast in the roles written specifically for them plus only a few of the large percentage of other roles for which Latinas could be considered. The fact that even though the Breakdowns afforded them the opportunity to be cast in 63.6% of female roles, but were only cast in 6.4% of female roles, demonstrates how their race/ethnicity was not preferential to industry professionals.

Latina Character Stereotypes

While numerical representation is important, *how* one is represented is equally critical for progressing diverse visibility. The Breakdown text that specifies the occupational, physical,[17] and personality attributes of Latina characters largely follows the familiar stereotypic patterns outlined in the literature as both gendered and racialized. The words used to describe Latina characters predominantly uphold conventional perceptions of Latinas in television programming. These same words, which reference caretakers, positive attractiveness, or an aggressive spirit are used to describe White women characters roughly half as often. While these words are gendered, they compound as raced and gendered due to the rate at which they appear in Breakdowns for Latinas.

The most frequently occurring occupations/titles for Latina characters in the Breakdowns described them in caretaker positions. As caretakers, 36% of the Breakdowns describe these characters as: "mother," "grandmother," "nanny," or "nurse." In comparison, caretaker roles are written in just 17% of the Breakdowns for White women. This is a meaningful finding in that it demonstrates a continued, racialized expectation of the Latina caretaker (Latorre & Mitchell, 2006). Furthermore, 50% of Latina mother characters are scripted as "single moms," whereas just 11% of White mother characters are written as "single moms." This finding highlights how race contributes to stereotype the single mother who is already layered with economic and social stigmas (Feasey, 2012; Hancock, 2004; Mora, 2018). Therefore, more than just following the mother/caretaker trope (Latorre & Mitchell, 2006), the substantially larger percentage of Latina mothers who are single-mothers over White women as single-mothers perpetuates the interrelationship of race and class (Tierney, 2013) and its subsequent discriminatory judgements (Montalvo & Codina, 2001).

Also problematic is the Breakdowns' pattern of describing Latinas as a male's companion: "wife of," "ex-wife of," "mistress of," or "girlfriend of." In these roles, women do not exist as themselves, but as an extension of a man. They are a female prop "of" a named, male character and their identity as a character in the narrative is exclusively tied to that of the man, who conversely, is not described as the woman's prop. These Breakdowns, which label the Latina character and identity solely in her relation to a male character, automatically minimize the agency and power of her character (Radicalesbians, 2002). This finding is gender specific, as it was also the case for White women characters (occurring only 3% less often than for Latinas). That said, holistically speaking, when caretakers and male companions are written specifically for a Latina character, they are not only gendered but also racialized.

The most frequently occurring personality trait for Latina characters relates to having an aggressive spirit. Such descriptions included words such as: "spitfire," "dangerous," "bombastic," "tough," "manipulative," "competitive," "controlling," "angry," or "ferocious." While 25.6% of the character Breakdowns for Latinas included these descriptions, only 16.6% of the character Breakdowns for White

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[17] There were no Breakdowns specifying African Latinas. The Breakdowns described three transgender Latinas for a single episode of one show. Latinas did not comprise any of the 15 characters with noted disabilities.

women included these descriptions. As such, the bombastic spitfire stereotype for the Latina character endures (Herrera, 2015; Valdivia, 2010).

The most frequently occurring descriptions regarding physical appearance addressed high levels of attractiveness. Words repeatedly used to describe Latina characters were: "sexy," "gorgeous," "beautiful," "attractive," and "stunning." While these adjectives were used in 17.5% of character Breakdowns for White women, they appeared in 33.4% of Breakdowns for Latinas. The prevalence of such wordage to describe Latina characters further perpetuates a Eurocentric perception of exoticness and sexuality in Latinas (Mendible, 2007). The Breakdowns' use of these words to describe Latinas much more frequently than White women contributes to the "sexy Latina" trope, which centers attention on her body and appearance.

Conclusion

Through an analysis of the SAG-AFTRA character Breakdowns for television programming between January 2017 and August 2017, this study demonstrated the continued intersectional discrimination of Latina characters in television. Despite perceptions by some industry insiders of a demand for Latina actors, the Breakdowns show that Latinas have the opportunity to be considered for over half of all female roles. However, they have been cast only in 6.4% of female roles and only 2.9% of all roles, which demonstrates little increase over the last two decades (Hunt et al., 2019; Molina-Guzmán, 2010). Furthermore, roles that are written for Latinas still are being described largely in accordance with outdated, interlocking, racial/gender stereotypes.

The character Breakdowns used for casting are a critical component to televised representations. It is the first line of communication between all industry gatekeepers (Hunt et al., 2018) and actors when establishing the portrayal of a character (Kendt, 2005). The character Breakdown, even more than the script, sets the tone for character portrayal, and ultimately representation. When it comes to gender and race, those few sentences used in the Breakdowns have the power to reaffirm or dismantle stereotypes. Word choices in Breakdowns affect media industry expectations for casting and actors' character portrayals. The result is media representations that contribute to the sociocultural understandings of race and gender (Fiske, 1987; Hall, 2013). As it currently stands for Latina representation, few character Breakdowns are written for Latinas, and when they are, words used in the Breakdown text reaffirm Latina stereotypes and character tropes more often than they challenge it. For Latina actors to be hired for the few roles available to them, they must fit the Breakdown description, and therefore are obligated to perform a distinct raced and gendered expectation.

This article underpins the casting Breakdowns' significance to communication, media, and industry studies while contributing to Latina intersectional research by exposing the Breakdowns' influence on discriminatory perceptions and hiring practices from the entertainment industry. Future research should consider tracking who is cast in each of the roles the Breakdowns specify as "open ethnicity" or do not mention ethnicity. This would allow for a clearer understanding of exactly who is being considered for these particular roles, and if there is a more specific implication of what this verbiage in the Breakdowns means for casting practices.

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