Latina Women, the American Sitcom, and Adapted Telenovelas

The Latina women in the adapted-telenovela comedy *Jane the Virgin* are significantly less stereotypical representations of Latina women than their Latina counterparts in the comedic shows *Modern Family* and *Last Man Standing*, which were created in the United States. The three main Latina characters on *Jane the Virgin* are often less stereotypical than their *Modern Family* and *Last Man Standing* counterparts, and are also poked fun at less often for cultural differences such as language barriers (which could be a result of these jokes not making sense in the original telenovela). Though both shows use the Latina women in them as sources of comedic interest because they are comedies, *Jane the Virgin* makes less fun of what makes the women different culturally or visibly than *Modern Family* or *Last Man Standing* do. The Latina women in the adapted-telenovela comedy *Jane the Virgin* are three-dimensional characters with emotional depth, back-stories, and strong personal beliefs. These characters are well developed throughout the series, and their stories (while playing off stereotypical aspects of Latin culture such as Catholicism or immigration) often provide insight into the characters’ motivations and beliefs. The Latina women in *Modern Family* and *Last Man Standing* are less three-dimensional and have less substantial back-stories (though in *Last Man Standing*’s case this may be due to Blanca being a reoccurring instead of a main character). Gloria from *Modern Family*, for example, has a relatively irrelevant back-story and when her life in Colombia is discussed it is done so stereotypically (one example occurring late in the series when Gloria talks about her
extremely large and loud Columbian family). Instead of being complex characters with well thought out back-stories and emotions, the Latina women on these shows are reduced to surface representations of stereotypical Latinas such as the hyper-religious Latina, the undocumented immigrant, the seductress, and the maid. These characters, and their representations of Latina women, are all strongly influenced by the nationality of the people who created them as well as by the types of shows (adapted-telenovela comedies or American sitcoms) that they are on.

On the adapted telenovela series Jane the Virgin, the show delves into the backstories of the three main Latina characters so as to make them less shallow, stereotypical representations of Latina women. The main Latin characters on the show are Jane, her mother Xiomara “Xo”, and her grandmother Alba Gloriana Villanueva. These Latina characters, though influenced by religious, Latin immigrant, service job (such as being a maid) and seductress stereotypes, are not in and of themselves stereotypical characters. Each character’s backstory provides even their most stereotypical actions with purpose and depth. In the episode “Chapter 1”, Jane and Alba Villanueva are shown to be devout Catholics. In the introductory scene to the episode the audience sees Alba telling Jane (in Spanish) about the inability to regain one’s virginity and the importance of remaining chaste. According to Teresa Correa from the University of Texas, Austin, “The marketing industry has also played a role in stereotyping females with Hispanic origin as family oriented, collectivist, [and] religious…”(427) so Alba and Jane’s Catholicism may at first appear to be stereotypical. Upon further examination of the show though, the importance of Catholicism in Alba and Jane’s lives is made clear through flashbacks and dialogue without making it a singularly defining characteristic of either character. Jane and Alba can exist outside the Catholic narrative created for them, thus making their beliefs in Catholicism
less stereotypical. In fact, Jane’s chastity is more a result of her mother Xo’s teenage pregnancy than her and her grandmother’s religious convictions; Jane’s fear of becoming like her mother is what actually reinforces her vow to remain chaste. Xo’s reluctance to identify as Catholic (or as religious at all) also goes against the conventional mold for Latina characters. This defiance of religious stereotyping helps the characters seem more realistic and less like caricatures of people, and this in turn helps the Latina viewers watching the show, who may or may not identify themselves as Catholic or religious, because they are no longer being force fed the clichéd religious Latina narratives that are often present on American television (particularly American sitcoms).

Similarly to Jane the Virgin, Catholicism plays a role on the ABC original sitcom Modern Family, though it is significantly more stereotypical and employed for comedic purposes. The main Latina character on the show, Gloria Delgado-Pritchett, is a devout Catholic like Alba and Jane Villanueva. However, unlike Alba and Jane’s Catholicism, Gloria’s Catholicism is much more stereotypical. On Jane the Virgin they dive into the background of each of the characters and thus explain in depth their religious (or non-religious) convictions; on Modern Family, Gloria’s religious convictions are explored significantly less often and are more often used as comedic points of interest. In the season two episode “Earthquake,” Gloria’s religious convictions are used for creating conflicts as well as for humorous purposes. In the episode, Gloria is seen arguing with her husband Jay over his decision to go golfing instead of going to church. Gloria becomes very upset when Jay tells her that he is “done with church,” and soon after an earthquake occurs. After the earthquake Gloria says to Jay “you say that you're never going to church again, and the ground shakes with a vengeance,” which implies that she believes that Jay’s decision to not attend church has resulted in the earthquake. This
stereotypically hyper-religious mentality is also made fun of later in the episode when Gloria is trying to explain to her son Manny what heaven is like. When he asks her “What do you walk on?” in heaven, she replies “Ay, Manny, don't be ridiculous. The clouds.” Instead of using Gloria’s Catholicism to create a more three dimensional character, the (extremely) popular American sitcom falls back on age-old religious stereotypes concerning Latinas. While the jokes concerning Gloria’s “outrageous” religious convictions may get laughs, they are also damaging to the Latina women viewing the show. Latina stereotyping like this creates an expectation within the United States as to how Latina women act; even if they are not religious at all, most Latina women are expected to be.

Another cliché that is explored by Jane the Virgin, Modern Family, and Last Man Standing is the immigrant stereotype; particularly, the undocumented, Spanish speaking immigrant stereotype. On Jane the Virgin, the Spanish-speaking, undocumented immigrant cliché is explored through Alba Villanueva. In the episode “Chapter Eight,” it is revealed to the audience that Alba is in fact an undocumented immigrant from Venezuela. Though she has lived in the United States for many years, Alba has never become a citizen and thus has a great fear of deportation. This fear of deportation is revealed in the episode as an explanation for Alba’s nervousness concerning Jane’s court case. Though at first this depiction of an undocumented immigrant may seem stereotypical, the show explores Alba’s backstory enough (as well as discusses the dangers that face undocumented immigrants) to make the use of this immigrant framework less stereotypical. Alba is not portrayed as villainous, as a criminal, or as in the wrong by the show, and this is an extremely important deviation from the standard portrayal of undocumented Latina immigrants as lazy, criminal, and welfare mothers. These portrayals are incredibly damaging to the both the Latina women and the American people seeing them. For the
Latina women, these portrayals negatively influence their self-worth and often make the Latinas viewing these stereotypes feel as though their origins are something to be ashamed of. For the American people viewing these portrayals, they reinforce damaging negative stereotypes (such as the lazy welfare mother who is taking tax money from the state without a “right” to do so) that make people view Latinos and Latinas in general in a negative light, let alone undocumented Latino and Latina immigrants.

The undocumented immigrant stereotype exposes a deep tension; this tension is the tension between undocumented and documented Latino and Latina immigrant workers. This tension can be seen in the show Last Man Standing when the main character Mike Baxter’s wife Vanessa is shown discussing hiring a new maid with her husband. One of the first things she mentions about the potential maid is that she is “from Guatemala” and “has her green card.” The importance placed on the maid’s (Blanca’s) green card is especially significant when one is discussing the undocumented versus documented immigrant dichotomy. Mike would have refused to hire Blanca as a maid had she not had a green card, and this reflects a greater narrative being sold to the American public through the media. This narrative, which conveys the belief that documented Latinos are “honest” and “hard-working,” places the American public (including some of those documented immigrants) against undocumented “illegal” immigrants who are often portrayed as lazy and delinquents. It is thus important to note that most Latino and Latina immigrants on television are depicted as being undocumented (with a few exceptions like Gloria and Blanca) as well as being depicted as criminals; often to the media, being undocumented immediately qualifies as being criminal, and often being Latino is considered a marker for being undocumented (when this is in fact not true).
According to the Latino Media Gap Report by Frances Negrón-Muntaner many of the media “about Latinos correlated them with crime and undocumented entry, [while] the majority of Latinos are native-born U.S. citizens…of the 52.3 million people in 2012 who identified themselves as having Hispanic or Latino ancestry, only 11.1 million or 21%, were undocumented” (19). This statistic is incredibly important when one observes how often Latinos are portrayed as undocumented, and this portrayal has real life effects. According to the New York Times article “Media Feed Bias Against Latinos” another study conducted by the National Hispanic Media Coalition found that “at least a third of non-Hispanic Americans — whites, blacks, Asians — mistakenly believe that half or more of the nation’s 50 million Hispanics are illegal immigrants with large families and little education” (Torregrosa, 1). The study then goes on to say that “many Americans believe the media portrayals of Latinos, largely as maids, gardeners, dropouts, and criminals” (Torregrosa, 1). Though these statistics may be able to be easily brushed aside, these negative portrayals of Latinos in the media cannot be ignored any longer. They are having visible effects on people; particularly on people who rarely interact with Latinos or Latinas in their daily lives. That is why it is crucial to keep these statistics and stereotypes in mind when one is watching television so that one can better understand the images of Latinos and Latinas that we are often being sold versus the realities of Latino or Latina life.

Another aspect of the immigrant stereotype that comes into play in all three TV shows is the Latina cliché concerning the inability to properly speak English and/or have a dependence on Spanish. Jane the Virgin subverts this stereotype through the multigenerational Latina family. The first generation, Alba, speaks only Spanish to those around her yet she fluently understands English. Throughout the series she does not speak English, and while this may seem stereotypical it is actually highly realistic. Many first generation immigrant Latinas have a strong
dependence on their native language (Spanish), but also have the ability to understand English. Instead of speaking English some Latinas (particularly older Latinas) use their families (like Alba does) to communicate with the English speakers around them, creating a bilingual familial dependency. They do this for a variety of reasons, the most common one being that they feel uncomfortable speaking English; many Latinas fear that they will get mocked for speaking poor English, an idea which is perpetuated by television, particularly American sitcoms. *Modern Family* is one of the sitcoms that perpetuates this fear through making fun of Gloria’s English. Throughout the series Gloria’s somewhat flawed English is poked fun at. In the season one episode “Pilot,” Gloria’s English (as well as her heritage) is made fun of when she is talking about the town she lived in in Colombia. Gloria is looking at the camera describing the town when she turns to Jay and says that it is number one for “what’s the word?” and Jay responds with “murders.” This instance, which both mocks Gloria’s English as well as falls back on the stereotype of the dangerous, criminal, and “comically accustomed to violence” (Negrón-Muntaner, 17) Latin American, is one which perpetuates the fear of public ridicule that many first generation Latina women face when speaking English.

Language, and the way language is ridiculed (or not ridiculed), is also an important aspect of *Jane the Virgin*. Xo, the second-generation Latina and first generation American, is bilingual. She speaks both English and Spanish fluently, and can switch off between the two languages with ease. Unlike Gloria or Blanca, Xo’s English is virtually flawless. This subverts the stereotype of Spanish speakers being poor English speakers, and makes the jokes made on shows like *Modern Family* concerning speech irrelevant. Not one character on *Jane the Virgin* mocks the way Alba, Xo, or Jane speak. This could be a result of the show’s origin; having been a Venezuelan telenovela before being adapted, it would have made little sense to mock the way
the women talked. While *Jane the Virgin* cannot be made to be representative of all telenovelas, it does reflect a trend that has become more obvious in recent years. This trend is that “Hispanic marketers and media producers appear as having a more sensitive attitude in the construction of Latino images as compared to the English media and marketers” (Cortez, 31-32). This can clearly be seen in the way Latinas are represented on *Jane the Virgin* (an adapted telenovela) versus the way Latinas are represented on *Modern Family* and *Last Man Standing* (both original American productions).

The stereotype of the "luscious Latina" who is “sexually out-of-control and [an] utterly colorful spitfire” (Cortez, 30) is seen in *Jane the Virgin* and *Modern Family*. In *Jane the Virgin*, Jane’s mother Xo would be the character considered to fulfill this portrayal. While Xo is definitely more promiscuous than any of the other Latina characters on the show, she is also in charge of her sexuality and actions. Xo has agency and makes decisions for herself concerning how she displays herself before the world. Xo is a sexual being, but she is not objectified. Cortez writes in her dissertation that the sexual Latina “stereotype…[has] a double-edge where – ‘the positive side of the stereotype is a powerful and sexy Latina… and the negative side is a boisterous, oversexed Latina…’” (31) In this case, *Jane the Virgin’s* Xo is the “powerful and sexy Latina” and *Modern Family’s* Gloria is the “boisterous, oversexed Latina.” Xo is not a character whose sole purpose is to be ogled at or amused by, while Gloria is one character whose main purpose on the show seems to be being sexual objectified and “humorously” ridiculed. In *Jane the Virgin*, Xo’s most “promiscuous” and “embarrassing” actions have deeper meanings behind them. One instance of this occurs in the episode “Chapter 2” during a flashback about Jane’s quinceañera that Jane and Xo have. Though Jane remembers the party as a disaster because of her mother’s embarrassing and somewhat unrestrained antics (stealing the microphone and
singing the song “Milkshake” by Kelis as she dances promiscuously), Xo’s flashback reveals her reasoning for acting the way she did. In Xo’s flashback we find out that she was trying to be a good mother and protect Jane from seeing the boy she liked kissing another girl at the party, so she distracted everyone at the party through her dancing and singing. Thus, Xo’s more unrestrained actions have purposes and meanings behind them that make Xo’s sexual promiscuity less stereotypical.

Gloria falls on the opposite side of the sexually promiscuous Latina stereotype than Xo does. While the audience is often led to believe that Gloria is in charge of her own sexuality, she is often made fun of for being an overtly sexual being. In the Modern Family season one episode “Coal Digger,” Gloria’s stepdaughter (who is actually 14 months older than she is) Claire’s son calls Gloria a “coal digger” saying that that is what his mother used to call Gloria. Claire’s husband Phil corrects his son saying that he heard it wrong and that Gloria is a “gold digger,” which is a demeaning term that implies that the young and attractive Gloria is only married to the older Jay Pritchett for his money. Though the conflict that this causes is resolved at the end of the episode, the family and audience continue to view Gloria as a sexualized being throughout the series. Her hyper sexuality is used as a comedic device, but it is a quite costly comedic device when one considers the effects that this over sexualized Latina depiction has on the young Latinas who watch the show. According to Teresa Correa, “Latinas have been historically depicted as…‘hot-tempered’, ‘tempestuous’, ‘promiscuous’ and ‘sexy’”(427) by the media, and this can have a damaging effect on the Latina consumers of media. Many young Latina girls see Gloria and think that the only way they can be on television is to be as sexual as she is, even though Gloria is often objectified by the show (as is the actress who plays her – see the 2014 Golden Globes and the rotating platform).
Lastly, *Jane the Virgin* and *Last Man Standing* address the new stereotype facing Latina women – the maid; *Jane the Virgin* does this through subversion, and *Last Man Standing* does this through compliance. Though Jane is not a maid, she does work a blue-collar service job as a hotel waitress. This falls into the stereotype that many Latinos and Latinas face which is that they are often typecast into blue-collar service jobs. In fact, Latino or Latina actors and actresses played 16.2% of blue collar and service worker roles on television (Negrón-Muntaner, 17). Jane the Virgin does break the mold by having Jane be a substitute teacher and aspiring writer as well as a waitress. Her ambitions are not blue-collar, which does make Jane and her career goals less stereotypical. These ambitions that go beyond blue-collar work are definitely influenced by the telenovela structure of the show; telenovelas often feature characters like Jane who work menial jobs while aspiring to something much more fulfilling.

In *Last Man Standing*, on the other hand, Blanca (the only reoccurring Latina character on the show) is a maid. It is not clear if she has ambitions that go beyond the labor that she is currently employed, but it is known that before she was working for the Baxters as their maid she was working for their neighbors. What is also clear is that there has been a large increase in the number of Latina women typecast in the role of the maid in the last 20 years. According to the Latino Media Gap report, “69% of iconic media maids in film and television since 1996 are Latina”(Negrón-Muntaner, 3) while “government statistics indicate that Latinos comprise 44.3% of maids or housecleaners”(Negrón-Muntaner, 19). This typecasting can be incredibly harmful to the audience because it perpetuates a stereotype of Latina women as service workers and nothing more. This stereotyping is particularly harmful to the Latina viewers of the shows because they often internalize the ideas that Latina women are more often than not maids or service workers and that Latina women should not try and be anything other than that.
Examining the television comedies *Jane the Virgin*, *Modern Family*, and *Last Man Standing* and the way they subvert and employ stereotypes has been an enlightening experience that has been quite fascinating. What can be concluded from the research above is that Latina women on the adapted telenovela series *Jane the Virgin* are often less stereotypical than their American sitcom counterparts. What cannot be concluded is whether Latinas in general are better represented on telenovelas and telenovela adaptions or not. To draw a conclusion on that topic, one would need to examine many more television series and see the effects those series have on the Latinas viewing them. Just because Latinas are better represented on *Jane the Virgin* does not mean that they always are. The Spanish-language television market often falls prey to stereotyping Latina women in ways similar to the American media. This reflects the idea argued by Herbert Schiller in his article “Not Yet the Post-Imperialist Era.” This article argues that though we may be seeing more media dominance from markets outside the U.S. (particularly Brazil and Mexico, where telenovelas reign) many of the ideas that they are exporting are still heavily influenced by the United States. He even writes that, “despite the developments already noted, the global preeminence of American cultural product is being not only maintained but extended to new locales.” (305) Thus, American ideologies and stereotypes concerning minorities (particularly Latin American women) are been perpetuated not just by American media but also by the Latin American (Spanish-language) media as well.
Self Evaluation:

I could improve this paper by strengthening my thesis. I could clarify what I am going to be arguing in the paper better in the introduction so that the reader can better understand what I am trying to accomplish with this essay. I could have also brought in more topics from the class explicitly such as globalization or identity, though I do reference them without explicitly talking about them. I could make the topic sentences of my paragraphs stronger so that the argument I am presenting to the reader is apparent, and I could improve the flow of the paper from paragraph to paragraph by pulling back to the general (away from the specific shows) a bit.