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STRATEGIC VISIBILITIES: DIGITIZING THE LATINA INFORMATION WORKER

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Introduction

“No background check required!” boasts Airus Media’s brochure featuring a picture of a smiling virtual Latina information service worker, which the company refers to as an “Advanced Virtual Assistant (AVA)”. These AVAs are life-sized holographic airport workers installed as wayfinding and informational kiosks that stand poised and at the ready to provide information to travelers passing by. Airus Media, formerly AirportOne, is a multimedia marketing firm based in Plant City, Florida that specializes in developing AVAs and film projects for the airline industry (Airus Media, n.d.). Currently Airus Media reports having completed airport AVA installations at San Antonio International, Destin-Fort Walton, JFK, LaGuardia, and Newark Liberty International Airports. While most of Airus Media’s AVAs are represented as white or white-passing women of European descent, the AVAs for the Long Beach and San Antonio airports—cities with significant Latinx populations and geographic proximity to the U.S./Mexico border—are culturally coded through phenotypic and linguistic signifiers to represent Latina identity. This suggests that Latina identity is being employed as a strategic design element in these border region airports, opening up questions about how Latina identity functions rhetorically in these AVAs and to what end.

Background

The current information labor environment in the United States, heightened by the amped up xenophobia of the former Trump Administration, is characterized by cultural anxieties surrounding technology, immigration, and nationalism. These tensions are magnified in the U.S./Mexico border region. We argue that Latina AVAs can be placed at the center of these tensions where they provide a useful lens through which to explore connections between Latina information labor, past and present, via the design

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of a digitized workforce. Latina information service workers, though fundamental to technoscience, have been largely *invisible* in histories of computing. Digging into the past of information and technology history reveals that Latinas have always been part of and parcel of information work, though their labor has been largely rendered invisible through dominant computing histories. Latinas have often been relegated to the precarious and migrant work of the information labor sector, sectors that often depend on such invisibilities for viability.

Latina virtual assistants mark an interesting shift in this labor history by relying on the strategic *visibility* of Latina identity in/as the technology interface and virtual service worker. This paper explores *why and how* these virtual assistants are designed as visible Latina information service workers, and *what purposes* these formations of visibility serve; particularly given the historic invisibility that has often cloaked Latinas' labor in the global circuits of information labor. Donna Haraway (1991) famously argued that women of color's bodies become part of the digital platform through their labor. Indeed, Latina virtual assistants prefigure the Latina body as the literal digital platform, raising questions about the interrelatedness of dominant cultural beliefs about the potentials of the Latina body as a technocultural labor resource. Finally, we consider the question of visibility, and why Latina identity is foregrounded in the AVA technologies when Latina information service workers have historically been purposely obscured.

Methods

To address these questions, we analyze the design rhetorics of virtual assistants as virtual workers, considering particularly how identity markers, such as race and gender, have served to amplify cultural ideas about technology, service work, and workers. Next we explore Airus Media's use of Latina identity in designing their AVAs by applying close reading techniques to their marketing materials and to the design of the AVAs themselves. Weaving this analysis together with threads of Latina information labor history, we find many continuities between the marketing of the Latina AVAs and the dominant cultural narratives about gender and race that have historically shaped Latinas as workers in information industries. We argue that Latina identity in the AVAs does political work as a cultural amplifier that recalls the archetype of Latinas as an ideal information worker. The "ideal" characteristics of Latina information service workers that have historically been used to maintain gendered and raced divisions of information labor are not only re-deployed through Latina virtual assistants, but are doubly emphasized as the desirable attributes of information technologies themselves.

Analysis

We find that Latinas are paradoxically envisioned in the white American imagination as both labor "problems" and solutions, leading to a complex set of tensions framing Latinas as workers. Latina information workers are portrayed as the ultimate in cost-effectiveness and "value" for the employer, and the digital Latin information worker maintains these affordances while side-stepping important questions about immigration status and labor rights. Simultaneously, interlocking hegemonic formations of gender and identity, informed by colonial and capital logics, reinforce Latinas as "ideal" for particular sectors of information work ranging from maquila manufacturing, call centers,

and now as digital versions of these roles via the virtual assistants. The design of virtual Latina workers draws on prevailing structures of white supremacy and Eurocentrism to underscore “acceptable” Latinidad in terms of having light-toned skin and an English-first, lightly expressed accent. Finally, the digital Latina information worker is positioned as a “trusted ethnic friend” who invites Latinx communities into further surveillance from agencies like TSA and ICE by way of interacting with her/the interface.

Conclusions

We argue that the strategically visible digitized Latina information service worker, wrapped in familiar discourses of Western capitalism and technoscience, functions as a socially acceptable avatar of the immigrant labor that continues to be foundational to the United States global economic position. Latina virtual assistants retain the necessary cultural markers to reinforce the efficacy of the virtual worker drawing on long-standing gendered, racialized, and colonial logics. Whereas it was historically important to hide or obscure the reliance on Latina’s contributions to information economies and industries to retain control over a cheap labor force, the digitized Latina information worker allows technology companies to superficially respond to representational politics without actually hiring Latinas into white collar information jobs. By merging the histories of Latina information workers with the design of a digital Latina workforce, we are able to see these labor formations, visible and invisible, as co-present and inextricably linked.

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