

Book Reviews

DIANA LEON-BOYS

Báez, Jillian M. *In Search of Belonging: Latinas, Media, and Citizenship*. University of Illinois Press, 2018. 184 pp.

At a time when the media landscape is quickly shifting to include different representational possibilities for underrepresented populations, *In Search of Belonging: Latinas, Media, and Citizenship* by Jillian M. Báez interrogates how Latinas make sense of, and engage with, Latina oriented media. Informed by an understanding that representations of historically underrepresented groups are meaning-laden and informative of social and political representations, Báez acknowledges the heterogeneous and dynamic nature of Latinas as they engage with the media. Using “citizenship” as her guiding theoretical framework, Báez argues that Latina audiences utilize media in order to understand their status of belonging and worth in the nation. Engaging with “citizenship” at the intersection of both media studies and Latina/o studies allows Báez the opportunity to provide a robust and nuanced understanding of the term, an understanding that encompasses symbolic, material, and cultural citizenship, as experienced by Latina audiences. Through a longitudinal ethnographic audience study, Báez blends multisided participant observations, in-depth interviews, and focus groups with forty Latinas of varying classes, sexual orientations, and nationalities (though mostly Mexican and Puerto Rican), in the greater Chicago area. In the field of audience studies, where interviews and focus groups are the primary mode of analysis, Báez’s rich methodological approach provides a significant methodological intervention. Further, within Latin/o media studies, audience research is lacking, and this text provides a welcomed addition that will enrich the subfield. Beyond the methodological contributions, the focus on Chicago allows for the departure from the typical “bicoastal focus of most Latina/o studies scholarship, including work on Latina/o media” (25). Overall, this text’s contributions are vast and interdisciplinary.

Báez highlights different modes of engagement that Latinas employ through their media consumption, focusing on local, national, and transnational contexts. Chapter One, “Navigating and Negotiating Latina Beauty” interrogates audiences’ engagements with national and transnational media, as they inform their understandings of the ideal Latina beauty. By providing a robust backdrop of race and racial formations, particularly as they relate to Latinidad in the U.S., Báez leads into her finding, which understands race as “the central category through which Latina audiences make sense of media’s construction of ideal beauty” (41). Through her interviews and participant observation, Báez finds that the women in her study understand beauty as racialized. At the same time, the participants are invested in beauty practices because they contribute towards deeper feelings of recognition and belonging. However, as previous media studies scholarship proves time after time, audiences

are not passive consumers of media. The participants herein often contested and redefined mediated representations of the ideal Latina beauty and as such, reclaimed “their worthiness and belonging through demanding more expansive representation” (41), a finding prevalent throughout the entirety of the text.

Chapter two shifts the focus from the national/transnational to the local level by focusing on media about Chicago, consumed in Chicago. Báez illustrates the significance of audience members’ contextual spaces in their meaning-making processes through three case studies in this chapter. She investigates audience interpretations about the films *Chicago Boricua* (2004) and *Nothing Like the Holidays* (2008), along with the American Girl doll Marisol. Understanding that media consumption occurs locally and that space contributes towards audiences’ receptions, Báez paints a nuanced picture of the complex ways in which Latinas interpret mediated texts about the city they call home. At the same time, the chapter illustrates how citizenship continues to be a guiding framework for how the participants engage with the media, and how that leads to its manifestation at the local level. This chapter could serve as a call to action for reception scholars to examine the significance of space and place within their studies.

In her third chapter, “Revisiting Hypersexuality,” Báez returns to a more national and transnational level by explaining how sexuality, more specifically hypersexuality, informs the participants’ understandings of, and engagements with, citizenship. After acknowledging and outlining the prolific scholarship on hypersexual Latina media portrayals, Báez contends that little of that research focuses on how the Latina audiences interpret these images. This chapter in particular focuses on the hypersexual representations and explains that Latinas make sense of these images in the following three ways: “through critique, respectability, and self-tropicalization” (83). The three techniques often contradict one another and/or overlap, further proving that Latinas currently navigate a complex social space in this nation. While some audiences rejected the hypersexuality by yearning for more conservatively dressed and upwardly mobile representations, others embraced the hypersexuality and saw it as a vehicle for empowerment.

Building upon the previously highlighted themes of hypersexuality and racialized beauty ideals, Chapter Four provides an intergenerational analysis of Latinas in their twenties, thirties, forties, and fifties. Here, Báez extends media effects scholarship, which mostly focuses on teenagers and young adult women, to include older groups of women, specifically Latinas. This chapter proves that age and generation contribute to Latina audiences’ readings of mediated Latinidad, and therefore shape how issues of citizenship and belonging are interpreted differently according to age. One of the most prominent findings in this chapter contradicts previous research within Latina audience studies, which noted that Latinas below the age of twenty-five were those most preoccupied with emulating dominant prevailing beauty ideals in order to achieve success. Instead, Báez finds that “women in their twenties are more apt to critique the unattainable ideals that are circulated in media than they are to obsessively discipline their own bodies through diet, exercise, and plastic surgery” (120),

ultimately proving that Latina audiences, across generations, are complex and interpret media in various ways.

Currently, Latina bodies are discursively positioned as foreign to U.S. dominant culture and simultaneously spectacular through U.S. mainstream media. *In Search of Belonging* highlights the pleasures and frustrations that Latina audiences experience as they make sense of media representations highlighting their positionalities. Báez illustrates how Latina audiences engage with media in the hope of being recognized through a frame of “citizenship.” Not only does this book demonstrate the need for more consideration of age within audience and reception studies, but Jillian M. Báez also lays the groundwork for future studies to engage with location-specific analyses. Further, the book serves to expand the research within media studies as it relates to Latina audiences. More broadly, this ethnography proves a compelling addition for Latinx studies, Gender studies, and American studies. Although not necessarily a limitation, given that one book cannot cover everything, a valuable extension of this scholarship could include a focus on production to provide a tripartite methodological approach focusing on production, text, and audiences.

Diana Leon-Boys
The University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

GABRIELA GUTIÉRREZ Y MUHS

Cantú, Norma Elia. *Cabañuelas*. University of New Mexico Press, 2019. 313 pp.

In *Cabañuelas* (2019), Norma Elia Cantú’s latest novel, the author normalizes the use of Spanish as part of the American English language. No other author has written Spanish as part of the living American experience of everyday life, in such an organic manner. There are no italics in the common dialogue in Spanish in this novel, it is part of the American language, the repository for authors to use while writing in English. This sets an important precedent for Latinx and Chicanx authors of fiction and memoir, by freeing them to truly express themselves in the languages in which they live. In her earlier novel, *Canícula: Snapshots of a girlhood en la frontera*, Cantú has coined the term *autobioethnography* as part of the critical terminology of evolving genres, allowing for authors to also consider their work ethnographic. This second novel is truly imbued with Spanish ethnography, that includes exposing the reader to Spanish cultural and religious traditions from the 20th century and earlier. The protagonist, Nena, visits several of the Fiestas while on her year abroad, conducting research at the National Library, Biblioteca Nacional, for her work on celebrations.

There are four parts to *Cabañuelas*. In *Cabañuelas* the titles in the Index are all in Spanish,