

Global Media Journal

German Edition

Book Review

The Gender of Latinidad: Uses and Abuses of Hybridity

Valdivia, Angharad N. (2020). *The Gender of Latinidad: Uses and Abuses of Hybridity*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell. 194 pages. Print ISBN: 9781405163385. E-book ISBN: 9781119574972.

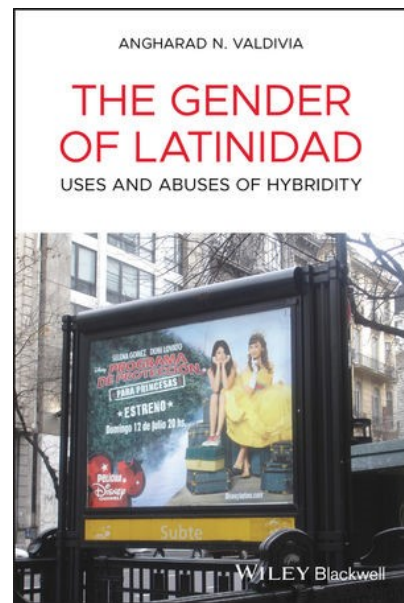
Dr. María Elena Cepeda

Author information:

María Elena Cepeda is Professor of Latina/o/x Studies and faculty affiliate in Women's, Gender & Sexuality Studies and American Studies at Williams College, where she focuses on intersectional approaches to Latina/o/x media and popular culture and US Colombian Studies. Cepeda is the author of *Musical ImagiNation: U.S.-Colombian Identity and the "Latin Music Boom"* (NYU Press) and co-editor of *The Routledge Companion to Latina/o Media* (Routledge). Her more recent writing has appeared in publications such as *Communication, Culture & Critique*, *Feminist Media Studies*, *Latino Studies*, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, and *Women's Studies Quarterly*, among others. Cepeda's commentary on popular culture and media has been featured on US media outlets including *National Public Radio*, *The New York Times*, and *Rolling Stone*. She is currently at work on a hybrid memoir/academic text, tentatively titled *Never a Local: Gender, Migration, Madness*, that examines the interplay of gender, race, media and mental disability in her Colombian family's migration story. For more information: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4718-1120>
Email: mcepeda@williams.edu

To cite this article: Cepeda, Maria Elena (2021). Book Review of Valdivia, Angharad N. (2020). The Gender of Latinidad. Uses and Abuses of Hybridity. *Global Media Journal –German Edition*, 11(2). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22032/dbt.51032>

In four accessibly written, tightly argued chapters, *The Gender of Latinidad: Uses and Abuses of Hybridity* engages questions of Latina media representation and production in contexts ranging from the “Spitfire Archive” to ambiguous Disney Latinas to problematic notions of a Latina/o/x media utopia. Squarely centering her analysis on mainstream US media and specifically on questions of hybridity as they relate to gendered Latinidad, Angharad Valdivia argues for a focus on mainstream media given its role as a privileged ideological conduit to much of the population. Addressing Latinidad within the context of the everyday, *The Gender of Latinidad* lucidly illustrates that it is often at the junctures in which gendered Latinidad is perhaps at its most flattened and most ambiguous – ironically, when it appears most absent and univocal in its renderings – that the richest observations regarding the interplay of gender, ethnicity, race, sexuality and nation may materialize. *The Gender of Latinidad* thus takes up the ambitious project of analyzing many of the absences and silences around gendered Latinidad within current mainstream media at the levels of production, representation, and audience.



Valdivia explicitly resists the temptation to frame hybridity in exclusively celebratory, facile terms. Rather, hybridity is conceptualized here as a site of radical possibility as well as a site of exploitation, frequently exercised through a carefully orchestrated ethno-racial ambiguity. Adhering to a transnational feminist framework, she offers the reader a vision of hybridity that accounts for the uneven access and mobility of Latina/o/x bodies within the circuits of transnational media, in symbolic as well as material terms. Hybridity is understood here as that which is frequently uneasy and painful, especially when attached to gendered, racialized bodies. As Valdivia posits, we must therefore attend to the unruly difference that Latina/x media subjects embody, and that renders them attractive entities to be harnessed in the name of greater Latina/o/x commodification, a more readily categorizable ethno-racial minority, and liberal notions of equity and diversity espoused in the interests of markets and the state.

In the first chapter, “Continuities and Ruptures: The Gender of Latinidad,” Valdivia outlines the premise of her study: to explore the tensions underlying gendered Latinidad as they play out on and through Latina/x bodies and cultural/expressive forms. Explaining her focus on the Latina/x body, she reminds us of the manner in which the female body has long constituted the terrain upon which struggles for national and ethnic identity have been waged, and how, in both absence and presence, Latina/o/x bodies sign in for the nation. An examination of gendered hybridity within mainstream media comprises the organizing principle of *The Gender of Latinidad*; Valdivia in fact designates hybridity as perhaps the most

“authentic” aspect of diasporic Latina/o/x culture. We are living a cultural moment in which Latinidad is signed in for most often by Latinas/xs, and particularly spectacular Latinas/xs such as Jennifer Lopez, Sofia Vergara, Shakira, and Cardi B. These women and others have informed global notions of gendered Latinidad for decades.

“Spitfire Transition Tales: The Production of a Career,” the second chapter, is not, as Valdivia clarifies, about representation. Rather, what she wishes to do here is to highlight the intense and endless cultural and ideological labor required to negotiate their own presence within the mainstream US entertainment world. Notably, by “presence” she is not necessarily always referring to superstardom, mega riches, and/or industry respect and recognition. “Presence,” however, does denote the stubborn ability to exist and above all *persist* – through talent, extensive effort, and the ability to re-invent the self – in a highly competitive US entertainment industry that was never designed with Latina/o/x performers or audiences in mind. As Valdivia elucidates, the career patterns we now observe amongst these most enduring of recent Hollywood spitfires point to an irrefutably neoliberal turn in the production and maintenance of Latina/x celebrity, in which entertainers committed to building a life-long career in the industry and achieving some relevancy must submit themselves to the constant process of reinvention. At the same time, the various case studies in the chapter point to the potential for Latina/x celebrities to exercise agency and in some instances not merely survive but thrive within the very real constrictions of the sexist, racist, ageist, xenophobic, and ableist Hollywood film and television industries. In particular, these women must contend with the power of the stereotype – the spitfire – the historic trope that simultaneously facilitates as well as colors their presence. Yet as Valdivia maintains, simply making it into the archive constitutes an act of agency.

“Spitfire Transition Tales” is squarely located at the crossroads of production, representation, and audience studies, inspired by Valdivia’s ongoing exploration of the work of early Chicana filmmakers Esperanza Vazquez and Sylvia Morales. These women’s noteworthy contributions to Latina/o/x media have been virtually erased, making it difficult for today’s scholars and audiences to learn of, much less access and study, their work. The archive thus proves critical to the enduring presence of filmmakers such as Vazquez and Morales for subsequent generations, just as it does for the Latina/x performers in front of the camera who must also constantly negotiate the Hollywood system and transnational media. Each of the five women discussed in “Spitfire Transition Tales” (Rita Moreno, Rosie Perez, Charo, Salma Hayek, and Sofia Vergara) is profiled in painstaking detail. Every era of each performer’s career is covered, including periods of little to no professional activity, every endorsement, every guest spot, every philanthropic venture; Valdivia harnesses a mountain of data in the service of firmly establishing the archival presence, the professional versatility and the sheer career longevity of each spitfire. The mapping of each woman’s labor and agency is precisely designed to contest the tendency to frame Latinas/xs who are cast as spitfires as the passive recipients of

the stereotype. Instead, Valdivia offers us a portrayal of Latina/x performers who over the course of their careers are obligated to make choices within constraints, and reinvent themselves as needed in order to survive a hostile industry and remain professionally relevant over the course of decades.

Chapter three, “An Unambivalent Structure of Ambivalence: Disney’s Production of Latina Princesses” focuses on the nexus between Disney princesses, tween fictional characters, and tween starlets who help to enact and sustain the conglomerate’s notably hybrid and vague representations which ultimately translate into an avowal/disavowal of Latinidad. Citing the conglomerate’s reliance on a lack of ethnic specificity via mixed-race characters and actors whose performances are ambiguous as well as ambivalent, Valdivia delineates how Disney deploys hybridity in the service of creating a clear pattern of ambiguous Latinidad within its narratives and global marketing strategies. She traces the careers of real-life actors Demi Lovato and Selena Gomez, as well as those of fictional characters Elena of Avalor and Sofia the First, among others. Valdivia succinctly outlines Disney’s strategy with regard to Latina/o/x consumers: offer content that is simultaneously pointedly ethnic and ethnically opaque, and that cultivates hybrid talent in the hopes of expanding the US and global Latina/o/x audience and maintaining their loyalty for the duration. This is a risk-averse, high profit strategy that offers a limited acknowledgement or avowal of ethnicity and global hybridity, while sidestepping consumer demands for cultural inclusivity. Within this context, ambiguous hybridity is mobilized – to echo Valdivia’s apt phrasing, it is used and abused – to offer up a profitable brand of gendered Latinidad whose qualities portend very real consequences in the lives of girls.

This restrained ambiguity, Valdivia rightfully notes, is both insidious and impactful, as the aim to produce ambiguity itself is grounded in the desire to provoke multiple decodings. The signs of Latinidad are often there, she concedes, but one must search for them within representations marked by absence and subtle intertextual cues. The slippery, contested nature of ambiguity, while certainly a limited form of recognition, also tends to favor those in power, or the entities and structures that already benefit from the discursive and institutional might required to set the terms of the debate regarding what (ambiguously) constitutes “ethnic authenticity” in the first place. Valdivia scrutinizes the ethnic ambiguity that exists alongside characterizations that are unambiguously ethnic in the career trajectories of Selena Gomez and Demi Lovato, two mixed Latina/x stars who began their successful careers as child stars at Disney. Valdivia identifies the patterns that define Gomez’s and Lovato’s early and present-day careers: both have largely chosen to downplay their mixed and therefore somewhat more ambiguous Latinidad, particularly when working for Disney. Perhaps most significant is the ongoing decision to background Gomez and Lovato’s Latinidad, while at the same time highlighting their mainstream appeal and specifically the neoliberal, postfeminist, and colorblind nature of their citizenship. As Valdivia observes, it is the postfeminist consumer context – complete with the pressure to perform whiteness, and to discipline

gendered bodies – that, in tandem with colorblind representation, deeply informs the manner in which ethnicity is incorporated into mainstream popular culture – or not.

This context does not merely impact the careers of live action performers, however; we witness a similar dynamic at play in what Valdivia characterizes as the tentative Latinidad on display in Disney’s treatment of animated Princesses Sofia and Elena of Avalor, both of whom also project an ambiguous, even contested Latinidad. She outlines one specific course of action adopted by Disney to contribute to the veneer of ethnic ambivalence and unambiguous ethnicity connected to Sofia and Elena, or the use of an “inspired by” approach. Indeed, offering audiences fictional characters whose worlds are “inspired by” a vague Latinidad allows Disney to vacate any claims for authenticity as related to a specific country or ethnicity. This refusal to engage Latina/o/x geographical, political, cultural, and ethno-racial specificity onscreen or off ultimately emerges as one of Disney’s most potent technologies of Latina/o/x disavowal. Moreover, it grants Disney considerable latitude to draw upon a variety of sources to develop its projects as well as concoct its own, a practice in which the conglomerate has long engaged. As Valdivia asserts in the chapter’s conclusion, we would be wise to read Disney’s initial, tentative steps towards Latina/o/x inclusion as strategies that are sometimes undertaken in spite of demographic and economic data to the contrary. Indeed, as Valdivia concludes, the power of ideology often blinds entertainment/media producers to irrefutable facts, such as the existence of a distinct, if highly diverse, Latina/o/x viewing public eager to see itself represented in popular media.

In the concluding chapter, “Latina/o Media Utopias: The Ideal Place or No Place,” Valdivia returns to the thorny question of Latina/o/x presence in media and popular culture. Focusing on long-standing industry and scholarly debates around inclusion in mainstream media, as well as Hollywood’s wholesale transformation, she highlights the frequently utopian nature of consumer and activist calls for greater Latina/o/x representation. Yet an inclusive media predicated upon utopian media impulses requires Latina/o/x presence and participation if the potential for transformation is to be realized. The sheer number and at times competing nature of these implicit utopian media goals render the possibility of achieving any sort of representational utopia much more difficult. Valdivia reminds us here that this is an examination of representation that cannot be adequately completed absent a consideration of production-level factors as well. Touching on case studies ranging from Disney’s utopian Celebration project and *Zootopia* (2016), from Latina/o/x awards shows to recent noteworthy Latina/o/x Media Studies titles, Valdivia identifies thoughts of utopia as a foundational discourse of Media and Communications Studies. Yet Valdivia is mindful to warn against the facile notion that simply increasing Latina/o/x presence at the production level, while certainly helpful, will not necessarily automatically result in more numerous, varied, and nuanced portrayals of Latina/o/x lives. That said, greater Latina/o/x presence in production is an integral step towards a future Latina/o/x media utopia.

The Gender of Latinidad deftly demonstrates just how it is often in contexts of erasure and silencing that the most compelling readings of mediated, gendered Latinidad may emerge. Angharad Valdivia offers us a highly skilled example of just how to read Latina presence into contemporary media texts and production practices. In the process, she complicates not only our understanding of Latina/o/x media production and representation, but also US mainstream (i.e. white, Anglo) media dynamics and structures. *The Gender of Latinidad* is also a text that resists any easy attempts at methodological pigeonholing, making it critical reading for those looking for models that more seamlessly integrate a simultaneous consideration of representation, production, and reception. It is destined to quickly become a landmark text and valuable archival resource for *all* scholars of media and popular culture, regardless of specialization, but will be of particular interest to those with interests in Latina/o/x Studies, Gender Studies, Cultural Studies, Girl Studies, and Disney Studies. Angharad Valdivia offers us a powerful Latina/x feminist love letter and academic treatise to those Latina/x media figures behind and in front of the screen, both fictional and actual, whose singular talents and efforts often go unrecognized, casting them beyond the archive.