Dolores Inés Casillas, *Sounds of Belonging. U.S. Spanish-Language Radio and Public Advocacy*

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Isabelle Vagnoux

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Dolores Inés Casillas, *Sounds of Belonging*. U.S. Spanish-Language Radio and Public Advocacy, New York: New York University Press, 2014, 220 pages

- 1 This keenly researched and well organized book provides a vivid and original contribution to the fields of Latino – more specifically Mexican-American – and media studies. It offers the first study of Spanish-language radio since Félix F. Gutiérrez and Jorge Reina Schement published *Spanish-Language Radio in the Southwestern United States* (Austin: University of Texas Press) in 1979 and fully rehabilitates the radio set as “a modern tool of globalization” (8).
- 2 With the formidable growth of Spanish-language radio stations, which have proliferated over the past thirty years, jumping from 67 in 1980 to some 1,300 in 2010, and unseating their English-language counterparts as number one in major radio markets (7), *Sounds of Belonging* focuses on the social and advocacy role played by these radio stations, which are part and parcel of Latino identity. It also emphasizes the growing significance of the Latino minority in the United States, presented as the third largest Spanish-speaking country in the world. This assertion might be nuanced, however, depending on whether one counts the number of Latinos or the number of *Spanish-speaking* Latinos. Depending on figures used, the U.S. would actually rank between third and fifth in the world as not all Latinos can speak Spanish.
- 3 Although the author recognizes that she focuses on Mexican/Mexican-American radio along the West Coast and particularly California, the title of the book is somewhat

misleading as one would rather expect a nation-wide study, encompassing all Latino groups. To what extent her analysis would apply, for example, to the East coast or to Cuban American radio stations remains to be further investigated. In other words, a more specific title would have been a better match given the very specific research conducted in *Sounds of Belonging*.

- 4 The study combines a chronological, historical approach to the development of Spanish-language radio, based on secondary sources and newspapers—to make up for the lack of audio archives in the early years—as well as programs, recordings and radio personnel interviews for the more recent periods, using such paradigms as racialization, transnational identity or gender. It goes back to the very early days of radio programs with the twin development of Pan-American-sponsored English-language programs and Spanish-language programs catering to an immigrant listenership. The author contrasts English-language programs celebrating Latin America, its folklore and exotic music in the late 1920s and 1930s, when good (or “patronizing”) diplomatic and economic relations prevailed between the United States and its southern neighbors, and the early Spanish-language programs that were relegated to the early-morning slots of English-language radio stations. They accompanied Mexican workers to their early work shifts, reflecting their “marginalization within U.S. society,” in the author’s words (15). Spanish-language programs soon became “acoustic allies,” playing on nostalgia, making immigrants feel at home away from home, but also serving the community with job listings, local affairs and advocacy-oriented announcements in the strongly anti-immigrant atmosphere of the Great Depression years. At the same time, Mexican-led Spanish-language radio entered the fray, offering a romanticized vision of Mexico. At the end of World War II, the first Mexican-American radio was launched. Casillas highlights the tight links between the development of U.S. Spanish-language radio and issues of national identity and anxiety over the “place of immigrants,” (50) an issue that continued in the next decades when bilingual community radio stations were introduced, powered by the Chicano and farmworker movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Casillas emphasizes the “under-the-radar existence” of rural bilingual radio stations, much less studied than their urban counterparts and other aspects of the Chicano movement, in spite of their political activism and the growth of bilingual public radio.
- 5 The chapter “Sounds of Surveillance,” enriched with conversation extracts, brings up immigration policy and control, the main issue for Latinos over the past thirty years. Spanish-language radio’s interactive format and its active advisory role in immigration issues started in the 1980s and, to a large extent, control most of the broadcasting schedules. Their talk-based programming allows listeners/callers to share their experiences as immigrants all the more candidly as they are not visually apparent. They also make guest immigration attorneys, professionals or doctors accessible to often poor and undocumented listeners and give them free legal advice to help them navigate the intricacies of the legalization or naturalization processes. In so doing, Spanish-language radio can be seen as offering free of charge services to the community while it “capitalizes” upon and draws profit from the conversation around immigration as programs are sponsored by companies closely related to migration, such as Western Union, AT&T or local attorneys’ offices.
- 6 Gender in male-led radio programs is at the heart of the chapter “Pun Intended. Listening to Gendered Politics on Morning Radio Shows,” which is also illustrated with

extracts. It relies heavily on the analysis of one of the most famous radio hosts, El Cucuy, the Latino counterpart of Rush Limbaugh in terms of linguistic violence and celebrity, an immigrant sending money home, a symbol of “transnational masculine image,” and an activist who played a prominent role in the 2006 immigrant demonstrations. Because radio has always tended to privilege male voices, Casillas “deliberately makes space for the voices of female listeners.” One might, however, regret the time-gap between the years when most interviews and recordings of radio shows were conducted (2002-2005) and the publication date of her study, 2014. To what extent, for example, is the gender issue similar over a decade later? Have women managed to develop their own shows in the meantime ?

- 7 In keeping with her strong emphasis on racialization and the larger dynamic of race and class, the author ends her study with an analysis of audience ratings, Arbitron, the dominant radio ratings company, and the disparity in revenue between English and Spanish-language radio (“Desperately Seeking Dinero”) In spite of excellent ratings, exceeding those of their English-language counterparts, due to an expanding Latino audience and a close link between Latinos and their radio programs, Spanish-language radio collected on average 40 percent less in revenue in 2006. Casillas argues that the methodologies used by the audience industry “work to preserve dominant hierarchies of race, citizenship, and language” (20).
- 8 *Sounds of Belonging* can be viewed as somewhat ideology-driven with its choice of the word Latino, seen as “pan-friendly” (xiii) over the more official “Hispanic,” and with the lens of racialization continuously used throughout the book. Most of the time, the analysis is convincing, but it is occasionally far-fetched, as when Casillas considers the fact that many Latino workers take their radios to work with them as “a symbolic form of defiance” to racialization and efforts to suppress Spanish (151). She overlooks the fact that, throughout Latin America, radio sets are traditional companions on worksites, and that immigrants simply imported these habits into the United States, most of the time without thinking in terms of defiance or resistance.
- 9 More than a media study, *Sounds of Belonging* deftly weaves together the many threads of Spanish-language radio, cultural history, business, immigration policy, gender, racialization, and globalization to paint a rich and vivid portrait of these transnational citizens living in the United States.

AUTHORS

ISABELLE VAGNOUX

Aix Marseille Univ, LERMA, Aix-en-Provence, France