

SO! Reads: Dolores Inés Casillas's ¡Sounds of Belonging!

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Abstract

In *Sounds of Belonging: U.S. Spanish-Language Radio and Public Advocacy* (NYU Press, 2014), Dolores Inés Casillas turns up the volume on the sonic and the political dynamics of the Latino immigrant experience in the United States.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Book Review, Chican@/Latin@ Studies, Diasporic Sound, Identity, Listening

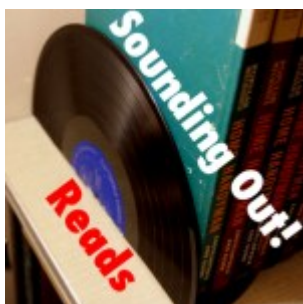


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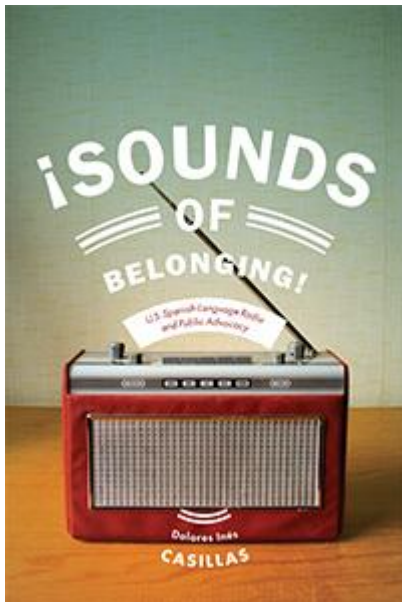
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In *Sounds of Belonging: U.S. Spanish-Language Radio and Public Advocacy* (NYU Press, 2014), Dolores Inés Casillas turns up the volume on the sonic and the political dynamics of the Latino immigrant experience in the United States. A theoretically rich yet accessible book, *Sounds of Belonging* jump-starts Spanish-language radio studies, proving that the broader field of radio and sound studies can no longer continue to ignore or silence the importance of Spanish-language radio—from its historical significance for Spanish speaking Latinos to its lucrative place in radio markets today. Spanish-language radio reveals the power of sound in shaping the lived experiences of Latina/o communities, including immigrants and those with deep roots in the United States. Casillas shows how sound acts as a platform through which Latin Americans insert themselves in the U.S. imaginary, despite the nation's attempts to erase their presence.

Sounds of Belonging provides keen insight into the constant buzz of immigration on the airwaves. Some questions that propel this book: What sonically constitutes the Latina/o experience in the United States? Also, what immigration-related sounds are found on Spanish-language radio airways? Casillas's emphases shows how little we know of how the Latina/o sounds.



Sounds of Belonging deftly navigates the historical and contemporary domains of Spanish-language radio, theorizing them as a dynamic sonic terrain where we can listen to struggles for and against power, as well as to modalities of difference. Beginning with the traces of Spanish-language radio that emerged early in American radio's so-called "Golden Age" in the 1930s-1940s, moving through the activist-driven bilingual Chicano community radio of the 1960s and 1970s, and then laying out the landscape of the highly profitable world of Spanish-language broadcasting today, Casillas guides readers through a historical trajectory of Spanish-language radio. She draws from Spanish-language radio broadcasting in its commercial and non-commercial iterations, while keeping tuned to the transnational connections transmitted through these frequencies.

Casillas engages with critical cultural studies, Chicana/Latina studies, and radio/media studies to explore the production of masculinity on El Cucuy's morning radio program. Casillas studies El Cucuy as both an on-air personality and a political figure advocating for immigrants'



rights, illustrating the "complex interplay of gender, labor, and globalization" (104). While El Cucuy's "shock-jock" style—imbued with sexual humor—often garners him comparison to Howard Stern or Rush Limbaugh, El Cucuy does more than shock and entertain his listeners. Casillas argues that sound and immigrant listening practices are integral to El

Cucuy's discursive aural constructions of a transnational working-class male audience, one that is not shamed for speaking Spanish, enjoying ranchera music, or laboring in "women's work." However, by highlighting how El Cucuy and his listeners reinscribe traditional gender roles that silence and marginalize Latinas, Casillas reveals the complexity of El Cucuy's political advocacy for male workers on the one hand, and the program's misogynistic message on the other.



<https://youtu.be/lWeERYqhOMk>

Sounds of Belonging pushes scholars to think more thoroughly about the role format and genre play in the characterization of radio stations, as well as the audience constructed through these programming choices. She characterizes Spanish-language radio as both on-air dialogues and conversations between callers and radio hosts. This approach provides an intersectional analysis comparing radio listeners to those working in production. Casillas opens a line of inquiry into non-normative or non-hegemonic radio practices by positing that Latino radio listening is public and communal and not a solitary practice. Casillas shows how research that frames listeners as a market—simply audiences or consumers—polarizes our understanding of radio practices, particularly within research on Spanish-language radio.

One of Casillas's most important interventions is her granular analysis of the role of radio in Latino communities, particularly within migrant and working class groups who may have easier access to and familiarity with radio, as opposed to other media such as the Internet. For these communities, radio becomes as an anchor, grounding the cultural ties Latinos have to the communities they migrated from—through stations' language and music—but it also functions as a way to aurally migrate between borders, specifically when listeners-turned-callers locate themselves bi-nationally.



Casillas also argues that Spanish-language radio is an alternative site of congregation and dialogues amongst communities that are marginalized *and* made hyper visible by mainstream English-language media. Anti-immigrant policy and legislation—heard and seen in popular media as a narrative of “illegal aliens” invading America—is the backdrop against which Casillas explores the role of Spanish-language radio as an “acoustic ally,” a concept she explores in the chapters “Acoustic Allies: Early Latin-Themed and Spanish-Language Radio Broadcasts, 1920s-1940s,” and “Sounds of Surveillance: U.S. Spanish-Language Radio Patrols La Migra.” She explains that Texas and California were home to the debut of U.S. Spanish-language radio in the 1920s, crafted specifically for Mexican listeners. Radio announcers such as Pedro J. Gonzalez brokered airtime, typically broadcasting during the unfavorable times of late night or early morning. As a method of resistance, radio provided Spanish-language audiences with the capability of listening to “home.”



Images of Pedro J. González, who was also a musician and a founding member of [Los Madrugadoras](#) in addition to an important early Spanish language radio announcer

In the chapter “Mixed Signals: Developing Bilingual Chicano Radio, 1960s-1980s,” Casillas uncovers a major gap in research on the aurality of the Chicano Media Movement. She pivots the analytical lens of Chicano movement activism from urban to rural areas and traces the emergence of bilingual community in conjunction with farm worker activism in California and Washington. Bilingual community radio stations such as Radio KDNA in Granger, Washington, KBBF-FM in Santa Rosa, California, and Radio Bilingüe in Fresno, California—places that rely heavily on low-wage farmworker labor—showcase how the political activism of this movement era took place on

emergent community airwaves. Listener-focused Chicano community radio stations “sought to broadcast independent of commercial influence, produce local programming, and, perhaps most significant, operate under the full control of Mexicans and Chicanos themselves” (52-53). While under the control of Chicano/a community radio producers, Casillas demonstrates how the funding model for community radio stations—namely, a heavy reliance on grants from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting—underscores the bureaucratic limitations for public broadcasts.

Sounds of Belonging opens the path for a new line of inquiry regarding Spanish-language radio while revealing that there is much work to do in the area of Spanish-language radio studies. Despite the chapter “Mixed Signals”’s focus on the community radio format, Casillas’s dedication to commercial radio highlights an urgent need for scholarship on non-commercial radio. Studying non-commercial stations will advance necessary conversations around content and innovation rather than economic success and failure.



Overall, *Sounds of Belonging* is an exciting and foundational text for scholars and readers interested in Latina/o media studies, sound, radio, cultural production, immigration and the Latina/o experiences in the United States as experienced and lived through sound and listening. Casillas’s agility in drawing from various theoretical and methodological perspectives provides a rich analysis of Spanish-language radio situated in a transnational context that reflects not just the listenership, but also the continued importance of radio for Latina/o communities living throughout the U.S. borderlands.

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Monica De La Torre is a doctoral student in the Department of Gender, Women and Sexuality Studies at the University of Washington. Her scholarship bridges New Media and Sound Studies by analyzing the development of Chicana feminist epistemologies in radio and digital media production. A member of Soul Rebel Radio, a community radio collective based in Los Angeles, Monica is specifically interested in the ways in which radio and digital media production function as tools for community engagement. She is an active member of the [UW Women of Color](#)

[Collective](#) and the [Women Who Rock Collective](#). Monica earned a B.A. in Psychology and Chicana/o Studies from University of California, Davis and an M.A. in Chicana/o Studies from California State University, Northridge; her master's thesis was entitled "Emerging Feminisms: El Teatro de las Chicanas and Chicana Feminist Identity Development." Monica received a 2012 Ford Foundation Predoctoral Fellowship, which recognizes superior academic achievement, sustained engagement with communities that are underrepresented in the academy, and the potential to enhance the educational opportunities for diverse students.

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