

Book Review**Title:** *Accessible Citizenships: Disability, Nation, and the Cultural Politics of Greater Mexico***Author:** Julie Averil Minich**Publication Data:** Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2014**Softcover:** ISBN: 978-1-4399-1070-2; also available as an e-book**Cost:** \$26.95, 240 pages**Reviewer:** Donna McDonald, PhD

An (un)holy trinity: Chicana/o cultural representations of the politics of disability images

The title of Minich's book—*Accessible Citizenships: Disability, Nation, and the Cultural Politics of Greater Mexico*—led me to believe that it would take up the challenge of the late Chis Bell's lament that disability studies fails to engage with issues of race and ethnicity (2006). As a lecturer of disability studies in Australia, I was keen to be illuminated about the indigenization of disability in Greater Mexico, with a view to extrapolating the themes of this book to other cultures. Unfortunately, while Minich's book responds to Bell's challenge, I was disappointed.

Minich's ambitions for her book—"My focus on disability and Chicanismo as sources of important insights about nationalism and citizenship stems from a belief in the political value of subaltern or minoritized identities" (p. 5)—are wide-reaching, but teasingly obscure to apprehend. Her analysis of representations of disability in contemporary Chicana/o literature and film as a way of understanding political engagement requires a deeply shared commitment by the reader to her task for two important reasons. First, Minich's selection of Chicana/o novels and films to illustrate her arguments assumes that both the Chicana/o and non-Chicana/o readers will be familiar with those cultural texts. This hurdle could be reasonably accommodated but for the second (and more fatal) obstacle: Minich's opening essay—"Accessibility and Nationalism: An Introduction" (pp. 2-27)—plunges the reader immediately into her complex, layered, and circumlocutory theoretical propositions, instead of providing a clear, concise description of the role and purpose of each of the following chapters. Without such a map, the two hurdles combined to make this particular reader anxious about how to make sense of the entire book. It also left me none the wiser about the day-to-day realities of contemporary disability politics in Greater Mexico.

Given that Minich makes much of her "scholarship" in her "Acknowledgements"—she notes that "no scholarship is the work of one person alone" (p. ix), that this is her "first scholarly book" (p. ix), and she thanks "scholarly organizations" (p. xi) for their support—it appears that Minich considers other scholars to be her target readers. Indeed, Minich stakes out her narrow readership territory on page 2: "disability scholars ... [scholars of] political belonging including Chicana/o studies, border studies, and queer studies". However, this select readership for Minich's indisputably solid piece of research will need significant prior knowledge of the cultural and literary texts which Minich explores to support her thesis. Alternatively, they need to be prepared to Google-search them during the course of their reading. Certainly, few readers outside Greater Mexico are likely to be at home with the works of "gay Chicano writer ... with disabilities" Arturo Islas Jr. (p. 32), "feminist playwright, poet, and queer theorist Cherrie L Moraga" (p. 57),

“the younger Chicana queer writer Felicia Luna Lemus” (p. 57), “Alex Espinoza—a gay, disabled writer who identifies as both Mexican and Chicano (p. 95), Oscar Casares, Chicano writer and filmmaker (p. 124), and Chicana novelists Ana Castillo and Cecile Pineda (p. 156). (Tommy Lee Jones is a rare familiar celebrity name in Minich’s exposition. He gets a fleeting mention as a “white, Anglo actor-director” (p. 124) who collaborated on Casares’s film “The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada”).

Further, the strenuousness of Minich’s thesis—that Chicana/o literary culture conceptualizes the political community through images of disability—is hard to shake off. While sincerely argued, her expository style occasionally feels contrived, convoluted and jargon-heavy. Examples can be found in any chapter, for example:

“*The Rain God* and *Migrant Souls* counter normative narratives of Chicana/o family; instead of positing the patriarchal family as an idealized representation of the nation, they reveal the violence and trauma that must be edited out of the family history in order for the patriarchal family to present itself as a whole and unified representation of the whole and unified nation” (p. 55).

This could be distilled to, “Contrary to idealized images of Chicana/o patriarchal families (symbolic representatives of a whole and unified nation), *The Rain God* and *Migrant Souls* reveal the hidden violence and trauma in Chicana/o families.” Another example the reader has to step her way through:

“I have scrutinized the liberatory potential (and shortcomings) of queer cultural nationalisms. These next two chapters, on the other hand, are concerned with dominant, state-supported nationalism—and more specifically, with the ways in which US nativism reinforces an exclusionary construction of the US national body that is mobilized to justify brutal immigration restrictions” (p. 95).

So much is contained in these 53 words. It is too much to absorb in a single reading, and requires the reader to slow down and parse each phrase before moving to the next phrase.

Having said this, Minich undeniably makes a unique and substantial contribution to our knowledge. Indeed, it is the hallmark of a fine scholar to make known what has been unknown, unfamiliar and formerly unreachable. This is how our understanding of humanity expands. Minich’s commitment to this challenge can be seen in her every attentively crafted sentence, every conceptualized paragraph, and every narratively shaped chapter. For this reason alone, Minich’s book is of substantial benefit to disabilities studies.

Minich states that her book “began with my dissertation research at Stanford University” (p. ix). This goes some way to explaining the complexity and density of her writing: the power of her ideas is often overwhelmed by the weight of her concepts. It would take a determined scholar to read her book from “go-to-whoa”. However, that determination would reap rich rewards for a disability studies or political studies scholar. A reasonably priced book, it would also be a good addition to the “required reading list” for a graduate class on disability studies, political studies or the humanities, providing a suitably provocative counter-weight to the usual suspects of white disability studies texts.

Reference

Bell, Chris. (2006). Introducing white disability studies: A modest proposal. In L. Davis. *Disability Studies Reader*. New York, NY: Routledge, pp. 275-282.

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