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Review of Beltran, Latino TV

Kate L. Flach

Mary Beltrán. *Latino TV: A History*. New York: New York University Press, 2021. 264 pp. $32.00 (paperback) ISBN: 978-1-4798-3389-4.

Reviewed by Kate L. Flach (California State University, Long Beach)

Scholars have studied the role early television played in legitimizing transformations in U.S. society in the 1950s, specifically the transition from European ethnic identities to homogenized Americans. Consumerism drove this redefinition, which benefited advertisers and broadcasters interdependently. Through this process, television served as a vehicle for ideologically shaping an American cultural identity connected to whiteness. This legacy fostered an industry that has failed to legitimize new transformations in the American population of the past 70 years by systemically excluding Latina/os from cultural production—a point that is more appalling considering that Los Angeles is the hub of television production and home to the largest Mexican American community in the nation. For example, although making up 18.7 percent of Americans in 2020, Latina/os constituted only 4.7 percent of working television writers that year (p. 2).

In *Latino TV*, Mary Beltrán argues that the failure to include Latina/os reinforces notions that they are not-quite a part of mainstream culture and not-quite American either. This exclusion contributes to a misrepresentation that impacts American cultural citizenship—a concept that Beltrán describes as a way for collective groups to participate in symbolic acts of citizenship. Central to participation in cultural citizenship, however, is Latina/os being able to tell their own stories in entertainment television rather than have their lives described through the lens of white showrunners, producers, and writers.

Beltrán's analysis of cultural citizenship grounds each chapter throughout the book as she traces the slow growth of Latina/o programming from the 1950s to 2010s. Beginning her first chapter with whitewashed depictions of Mexican American histories in 1950s westerns such as *The Cisco Kid* (1950-1956) and *The Nine Lives of Elfego Baca* (1958-1961), Beltrán shows how ideas of Latina/o cultural citizenship didn't fully develop until the 1970s amid growing Latina/o enrollments in higher education and emergent Chicana/o and Latina/o studies programs. This is best demonstrated in chapter 2, which is perhaps the strongest chapter of the book, in which Beltrán describes the possibilities of meaningful Latina/o TV. This was due to the inroads Chicana/o and Puerto Rican activists made with local television production, the Federal Communications Commission's Prime-Time Access Rule (1970), and funding through the Ford Foundation's National Educational Television. Taken together, funding and opportunity paved the way for public affairs shows like *¡Ahora!* (1969-1970) on the Los Angeles PBS station KCET and *Realidades* (1971-1977) on New York City's WNET station. Both shows provided community-based programming on their local stations in addition to training hundreds of Latina/os in media production. But when the assimilationist ideals of the Ford

Foundation clashed with the goals of Latina/os making such programs, funding deteriorated and so did these series.

The evolution of how networks have thought about Latina/o audience grounds the narrative arc of the book. Chapters 2-6 move from an emphasis on localized Chicano and Puerto Rican viewers in the 1970s, to pan-Latino in the 1980s and 1990s, to multi-ethnic in the early-aughts, and to Latina/os in the 2010s. Through each period, Beltrán examines the extent to which Latina/os are included in cultural production. Even when there was an increase in mainstream programming that featured recurring Latina/o cast members in the 1980s and 1990s, for instance, there was decline in Latina/o writers as networks grappled with how to include Latina/os in narratives without alienating a presumed white audience.

Although Beltrán shows how Latina/o programming increased and changed over time, a throughline throughout the chapters is how social segregation affected cultural production. In the late-20th century, cultural diversity was still often associated with Black integration, but Latino advocacy groups brought to the fore how segregation of Latina/os from white communities in the Southwest, New York, and New Jersey contributed to a lack of awareness by television writers and producers regarding Latina/o experiences and stories. Thus, tensions arose between established white producers and novice Latina/o actors and writers who had less experience with production because they had been excluded from the industry for decades. Integration in television, therefore, appeared superficial as Latina/os who worked on certain programs were tokenized and not considered worthy of training for a career in media. This tension played out behind the scenes of *Chico and the Man* (1974-1978) when NBC put forth shallow attempts to employ Latina/os and create screenwriting mentor programs that never materialized or fizzled out shortly after they began.

Latino TV shows how the struggle for self-representation is not limited to the past but continues into our modern era in two ways. The first is because of discrepancies in budgets for certain programming, such as Showtime's *Resurrection Blvd.* (2000-2002) compared to HBO's *The Sopranos* (1999-2007). The second is because of class and language-based assumptions about Latina/o viewers that direct advertising at the expense of a show's success. ABC's sitcom *Cristela* (2014-2015) staring Mexican American comedian Cristela Alonzo is an example. Rather than advertise on billboards in Los Angeles, the series was promoted on bus benches and Spanish language media outlets even though English-dominant Latina/os were its primary audience. Even when there is a sea change regarding increased programming with Latina/o writers and/or producers at the helm, how networks handled advertising, budget, and timeslot suggest that such shows were less valued and prioritized.

Beltrán's primary research consists of production and promotional records, but most of the study is hinged on oral histories and interviews conducted by the author with Latinas and Latinos who have worked in television. The latter source base is particularly

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important considering the archival limitations of the many programs written about in *Latino TV*. In nearly every chapter, Beltrán notes episodes that weren't preserved and materials that were not archived, which supports her argument about the indifference regarding Latina/o cultural history. Furthermore, considering that archival collections are typically attached to the producer of a series, if most producers were white then the involvement of Latina/o writers or actors would not necessarily be documented. Therefore, conducting oral records of Latina/o experiences in television is critical to studying the history of Latina/o representation and authorship.

Although more implied than directly stated, Beltrán points to a conundrum within the television industry that is at the heart of this study. Despite Latina/o Milliennials making up 24 percent of the young adult viewership, networks have made few attempts to tap into this audience. At its most superficial level, the dismissal of such a large part of the viewing population defies the market logic that has historically driven the industry. But Beltrán is not making a case for expanded network profits. Quite the opposite. She demonstrates through historical analysis how deeply entrenched systemic racism is embedded in television, so much so that the industry can't seem to get out of its way to capitalize on a growing market base. And yet, despite the great lengths Latina/os have had to go through to achieve cultural citizenship, Beltrán is explicit regarding the stakes of exclusion and inclusion on television. Under-representation fosters misunderstandings of who Latina/os are and their disparate cultures and identities. This creates a space for stereotypes to develop in addition to assumptions of Latino homogeneity, which is highlighted during every election as pundits discuss Latina/o voters as a "sleeping giant." Essentially, Beltrán makes clear that the denial of cultural citizenship provokes anxieties over whether and how Latina/os fit in the national imaginary of the United States.

Latino TV seeks to recount the history of Latina/o exclusion to rectify the past and to change the future of televisual storytelling. Although there is still an under-representation of Latina/os in media, those who have gained a foothold in the industry have established mentoring programs, support groups, and whisper networks to help future generations share new narratives and worlds. Overall, *Latino TV* is an excellent interdisciplinary study that does not lose sight of how each decade's historical context shaped the production and consumption of television. Beltrán's book examines the intricate relationship between popular culture and identity and would appeal to readers interested in Latina/o activism, television production, authorship, and citizenship.