

Citizenship Excess: Latino/as, Media, and the Nation

reviewed by Michael Vavrus – July 10, 2014

Title: Citizenship Excess: Latino/as, Media, and the Nation

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Publisher: New York University Press, New York

ISBN: 0814724132, **Pages:** 284, **Year:** 2013

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Hector Amaya tells us in the opening sentence of his book that he does not have “a usable citizenship” (p. vii) as someone who lives in the United States with a Mexican passport and works as an associate professor in media studies at the University of Virginia. Amaya’s statement increasingly makes sense, however, for immigrants in general through his extensive theoretical analyses and concrete historical and contemporary examples. Taken in total, *Citizenship Excess* deconstructs common notions and interpretations of citizenship and reconstitutes citizenship in its uneven application. In the wake of differential and unstable citizenship, Amaya brings new and important insights to media diversity as part of the continuing failings of the Federal Communications Commission to uphold its statutory responsibilities.

As the subtitle might suggest, Amaya’s investigation of citizen/citizenship is highlighted by the experience of Latino/as, the role of media in popular culture’s construction of citizenship, and what this means for a territorial entity we call the nation. With an indefatigable critical analysis of citizenship, the themes of immigration, media, and the nation are effectively woven into his text. To be clear, this is not just a book about citizenship or media or Latino/as immigrants or the meaning of nation but instead, as Amaya convincingly explains, we cannot fully appreciate any of those topics without the others.

Amaya introduces the concept of “citizenship excess” as “a political and media theory” that argues “citizenship is inherently a process of uneven political capital accumulation and that the unevenness follows ethno-racial lines” (p. 2). With this statement, we correctly anticipate that political economy and critical race studies are incorporated into his study. In regards to his use of *excess* in his title, Amaya explains that it

signals that citizenship cannot be rehabilitated within the nation-state . . . and helps us to see that excess happens when those who are in power can organize political markets in such a way that political transactions yield a surplus value that they accumulate. The accumulation of such political value, over time, becomes the basis for more and for easier accumulation. (p. 2)

In an endnote to page 2, Amaya further clarifies that “I use *excess* in the Marxian...sense...as the accumulation of surplus political value. In this tradition, excess leads to abuses of power” (p. 231). From the opening pages readers come to understand that Amaya plans to wade deeply into the contested concept of citizenship that moves beyond any kind of feel-good, color-blind citizenship that will provide instant political agency. Embedded throughout *Citizenship Excess* is the reality that “citizenship is a contested site of social struggles . . . through which subjects become political” (Isin, Neyers, & Turner, 2009, p. 1).

Amaya uses the Introduction, “Latinas/os and Citizenship Excess,” and Chapter One, “Toward a Latino Critique of Public Sphere Theory,” to theoretical ground his work before proceeding to chapters with applications to the massive immigration rallies in the last decade, U.S. immigration detention centers, the hegemony of English-language media over Spanish-speaking media, a case study of the popular television show “Ugly Betty,” and the meaning of non-citizen soldiers in the U.S. military. Amaya’s case study chapters demonstrate his ability to provide multiple perspectives on issues that governments, media, and popular culture obfuscate through nationalistic rhetorical simplifications.

A key premise of *Citizenship Excess* is the necessity to recognize the colonial roots that underlay modern citizenship. Drawing from world-systems theory, Amaya applies the concept of “‘coloniality’ to reference the way colonial domination between the European core and the American periphery was concretized through law and administrative processes...[that] survived independence movements and became part of the legal and policy frameworks of nation-states” (p. 25). From here Amaya critiques the proclaimed universalism of liberalism by providing an historical overview of U.S. racialized citizenship as

evidenced through a privileging of whiteness. This serves Amaya's analysis in his worthy critiques of how and why mainstream media limit Latino/as expressions and frames immigration from a nativist perspective that is hostile to ethnic and language differences. The extralegal role that nativists play in Amaya's presentation gives pragmatic expression to Corey Robin's (2004) observation on how liberal democracies permit non-governmental, civil groups to carry out "repressive fear" and how "elites often rely upon these weapons of civil society, which are not subject to much constitutional restraint" (pp. 1062-1063).

Government and media frames are locked in a human rights paradigm that exempts the U.S., Amaya explains, and therefore allows violations of internationally recognized human rights by government officials to proceed with impunity. As a case study, he uses documented abuses at the Hutto Correctional Center in Texas, a place where immigrants, including those who are children, are "outside the reach of human rights jurisdiction...[and] are desubjectified, living in spaces of exception" (p. 97). Clearly, such practices continue beyond the publication of *Citizenship Excess* (cf. Fitzsosa, 2014; Navarrette, 2014).

Amaya provides an excellent critique of the marginalization of Spanish and Spanish-language media. Along the way he reveals how Spanish-language media, especially radio, contributed to the unprecedented massive 2006 pro-immigration rallies that basically caught white-centric English-language media unaware of this potential. His multidimensional case study of the Latino/as-based mainstream television show "Ugly Betty" carefully reveals both positive and negative outcomes of the show.

While many media scholars may be content to confine an interdisciplinary investigation to obvious media topics, Amaya goes on to brilliantly break what was new ground for this reviewer with his chapter "Mediating Belonging, Inclusion, and Death." The title of that chapter may suggest a focus on immigrants struggling to enter the U.S. and facing death throughout their journeys. Instead, it delves deeply into why immigrants without U.S. citizenship would enlist in the U.S. military. He deconstructs the common sense belief that enlistment will lead to citizenship by using the example of the first four non-citizen Latino soldiers who died in the first month of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. He uses coloniality to explain a history of poor people, people of color, and non-citizens who have participated militarily in all major U.S. wars. Although space precludes any depth of explanation of this important chapter, let it suffice and entice potential readers with Amaya's argument that "the armed forces are structured in a racialized and classed fashion and that the notion of a volunteer army is, at best, a lazy idea, if not an outright fantasy" (p. 203). This claim contradicts the flag-waving, patriotic boosterism that government officials and their media handmaidens make around the combat deaths of non-citizen immigrant U.S. soldiers.

Whereas Amaya superbly employs coloniality to explain the marginalization of Spanish-language media, he may in the future want to consider the multitude of indigenous languages brought to the U.S. by Latin American immigrants. Once in the U.S., indigenous immigrants regularly face discrimination in competition with nonindigenous migrants (Yescas, 2010). Having suffered under a coloniality of hegemonic Spanish-language in Mexico and again in the U.S., the 165,000 indigenous migrant farm workers in California alone "speak twenty-three languages, come from thirteen different Mexican states, and have rich cultures of language, music, dance, and food that bind their communities together" (Bacon, 2014). Indigenous immigrants and their languages represent a media topic worthy of further exploration for diversity and media in the context coloniality.

What might be considered a theoretical shortcoming with Amaya's ambitious text is his desire to separate out the political from political economy. Political economy is not one-dimensional but is a useful framework to consider ideological orientations across the entire political spectrum. Neither political nor economic power can be understood without reference to one another in a world-systems model (cf. Wallerstein, 2011).

A minor concern is Amaya's underdeveloped use of theories that underpin different multicultural orientations. Amaya introduces "soft multiculturalism" (p. 29) for how corporate media understands diversity and Latino/as for their potential profitability over actual social needs of immigrant populations (Chapter 4). This is less multiculturalism and more about neoliberal exploitation in the name of diversity. He turns to the best hope of liberal multiculturalism for a kind of horizontal citizenship "to ameliorate the negative effects of coloniality" and acknowledges that it "cannot fully resolve the injustices that immigrant communities endure" (p. 150). Yet, a few pages later he positively contends that "a linguistic multicultural liberal perspective is likely to ameliorate the significant injustices in our current linguist and ethnic media landscapes" (p. 155). Despite a sustained critique of liberalism, he overlooks that a primary unit of analysis for liberalism is the ahistorical individual. Critical multiculturalism, on the other hand, incorporates the importance of the recognition of *group identities* and *resource redistribution* (cf. Vavrus, forthcoming). Critical multiculturalism is a perspective that goes beyond liberal multiculturalism but is more in line with Amaya's actual position and reflects a transformative concept of citizenship where actions taken "are designed to promote values and moral principles—such as social justice and equality—and may violate existing conventions and laws" (Banks, 2009, pp. 316-317; Banks, 2013).

Amaya is expansive in what he covers and for this reason alone *Citizenship Excess* is not an introductory text. Pedagogically, the theoretical basis provided in just the Introduction and Chapter One would be worthy of a series of graduate-level seminars before novices proceed to his rich case study chapters. Given Amaya's scope and thoughtful depth of analyses, the entirety of *Citizenship Excess* should find a welcoming audience for media and citizenship scholars.

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Cite This Article as: *Teachers College Record*, Date Published: July 10, 2014
<http://www.tcrecord.org> ID Number: 17594, Date Accessed: 9/15/2014 12:37:23 PM

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