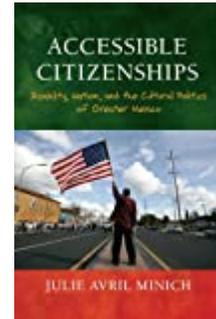


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Julie Avril Minich. *Accessible Citizenships: Disability, Nation, and the Cultural Politics of Greater Mexico.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013. 241 pp. \$84.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4399-1069-6.



Reviewed by Dustin Galer (University of Toronto)

Published on H-Disability (December, 2014)

Commissioned by Iain C. Hutchison (University of Glasgow)

In *Accessible Citizenships: Disability, Nation, and the Cultural Politics of Greater Mexico*, Julie Avril Minich asks how disability has been used to build, reconfigure, and dismantle real and imagined political communities in the context of an evolving Chicana/o cultural nationalist movement. Breaking new transdisciplinary ground in disability studies and Latin American studies, Minich presents a highly insightful and rigorous study of the ways in which the “ideology of ability” (p. 96) has been repeatedly represented in Chicana/o texts, images, and film. Minich finds that these representations are often deployed within the Chicana/o counternarrative in conjunction with other non-normative and anti-normative discourses in order to challenge the hegemonic body politic. As a result, she suggests that definitions of nationalism are made not just from the defense of ideal forms, but also the propagation of non-normative imagery and rhetoric. Readers also learn of the ways in which these ideologies have been used toward exclusive ends, such as in the policing of national borders and in defense of dominant gender, sexuality, race, and ability norms. Through close reading and detailed analysis, Minich argues that such “corporeal images used to depict national belonging have important consequences for how the rights and obligations of citizenship are dis-

tributed” (p. 2).

Accessible Citizenships presents a nuanced and methodologically sophisticated discussion rooted in literary criticism of cultural works, drawing upon Minich’s background in comparative literature, linguistics, and Latin American studies. An interdisciplinary professor at the University of Texas at Austin, Minich completed her dissertation, on which this book is based, at Stanford University. Minich wonders why the nation-state is the only true organizational tool with which to safeguard human rights, arguing that the book responds to the broader idea of national belonging (p. 194). She defines “Greater Mexico” as a transborder space aligned with demographic realities of contemporary Hispanic settlement patterns as well as the imagined political community of Aztlán promoted in Chicana/o cultural nationalism. The phrase “accessible citizenships,” meanwhile, promotes the ideal of a more equitable distribution of rights not necessarily anchored to one’s relationship to the nation-state. The book is divided into three sections, each of which explores facets of Chicana/o cultural nationalism within different geographical and discursive spaces. This structure focuses on different “moments” in the history of Greater Mexico, including the development and peaking of Chicana/o cultural nationalism in

the 1960s and 1970s with El Movimiento; U.S.-Mexico border debates; and neoliberal challenges to nation-state sovereignty.

The first section looks at the evolution of cultural nationalism within Mexico, analyzing the texts of Arturo Islas Jr., Cherri Moraga, and Felicia Luna Lemus. The first chapter examines the work of gay, disabled, Chicano writer and Stanford professor Arturo Islas Jr (1938-91). Minich's analysis of Islas's novels *The Rain God* (1984) and *Migrant Souls* (1990) reveal "how life in a triply stigmatized body—queer, racialized, and disabled—might offer access to a profoundly different conceptualization of community" (p. 34). Islas's work is seen to address the failure of Chicana/o cultural nationalism to adequately address "mysogyny, heteronormativity, and able-bodied dominance" (p. 36). In the novel, Islas's queer and disabled protagonist, Miguel Chico, struggles with internalized hatred of his deviance, especially of his disability, due to social conditioning on the part of his family. Minich demonstrates how Chico's "heteronormativity" is symbolic of a new body politic that challenges exclusivist Chicana/o nationalist writing, instead promoting the role of literature in creating inclusive and diverse notions of community. The second chapter's critique of the works of Moraga (b. 1952) and Lemus (b. 1975) similarly demonstrates how the failure to account for bodily difference in Chicana/o cultural nationalism reveals its limited capacity to achieve its "utopian promises" (p. 58). Minich examines Moraga's critique of counternationalisms and the ways in which they actually reify essentialist categories of race, gender, sexuality, and ability in order that they serve to perpetuate exclusion. These texts are not necessarily strongly nationalist, but explore the ways in which queer writing reshapes the parameters of Chicana/o cultural nationalism.

The second section examines political belonging along the U.S.-Mexico border. The third chapter considers how immigration policies reflect the collective will and belief systems of the nation and how this can provide a revealing look at the ways in which disability is regarded in society. Through analysis of media coverage concerning the fate of an injured undocumented migrant worker, Minich describes how there is already a "Latino threat narrative" in American discourse that blames this population for various social problems (p. 99). This discourse pathologizes the Latino population which also serves to reinforce the stigma already experienced by disabled people. This chapter in particular considers how the ideology of ability is used "as an instrument of violence and even of death," as when deportation is used as a

virtual death sentence (p. 99). The fourth chapter considers how depictions of aging male bodies challenge dominant American national body ideals. Minich analyzes the novel *Amigoland* (2009) by Oscar Casares (b. 1964), featuring elderly Chicano brothers living in the United States, as well as the film *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (2005), including the screenplay by Guillermo Arriaga (b. 1958) and performance by Tommy Lee Jones (b. 1946). In her analysis of these depictions of crossings from the United States to Mexico, Minich considers "how the border keeps people in" especially when Mexico (and not the United States) is depicted as a place of longing (p. 123). In *The Three Burials*, for example, Jones plays an elderly Anglo rancher who seeks to repatriate the body of a murdered undocumented ranch worker to his "rightful" place of burial. Minich demonstrates how Jones's performance visually depicts the decline of American national identity, "ruined by its own disregard for life" (p. 130). Minich shows how these depictions of aging men illustrate loss of authority, agency, and political status, which is similar to the experience of undocumented migration and its threat to protection of human rights.

The final section analyzes the impact of an advancing neoliberal agenda on disability identity politics, including the creation of new opportunities to challenge a traditional state-centered nationalist approach. Minich describes how an "overcoming narrative" (p. 156), encapsulated by the stereotypical American myth that anything is possible with hard work and the right attitude, is often deployed against people with disabilities and the challenges they face on a daily basis. As this approach obviously overlooks the realities of discrimination and lack of access that persist beyond one's attitude, Minich considers what is at stake when the "overcoming narrative" is appropriated by identity-based political movements. Minich examines two novels by Ana Castillo (b. 1953) and Cecile Pineda (b. 1932) that deploy the "overcoming narrative" in ways that reconfigure conceptualizations of identity and nationalism. Her analysis suggests that simply rejecting identity politics may leave us without the tools to contest current and future problems; yet, we should strive to embrace more inclusive and non-normative models of identity.

Accessible Citizenships is a convincing and essential read for disability historians working to build new, or strengthen existing, transdisciplinary bridges, especially scholars whose work is rooted in the emancipatory politics of disability rights. Using body metaphors to explore connections between Chicana/o studies, border studies, queer studies, and disability studies, Minich

demonstrates how an interdisciplinary reading of representations of ability has the power to reconfigure our perceptions about the body politic and national belonging. Her work lays important foundations in helping to define the contours of an accessible form of national belonging which, by her own admission, provides a starting point for examining accessible political communitiesâ (p. 4).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-disability>

Citation: Dustin Galer. Review of Minich, Julie Avril, *Accessible Citizenships: Disability, Nation, and the Cultural Politics of Greater Mexico*. H-Disability, H-Net Reviews. December, 2014.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=42194>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.