

Book Review

Passing: Two Publics in a Mexican Border City. *Rihan Yeh.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018. 295 pp.

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In the past decade, several books have explored the multiple meanings of Tijuana as a borderland city, a fascinating urban space that epitomizes social hierarchies operating in close proximity to a porous contact zone: the border between Mexico and the United States of America. These accounts by multidisciplinary scholars have successfully challenged reified notions of Tijuana as a space primarily understood as a city of passage. Tijuana is increasingly observed in its full complexity, both as a city of global music and artistic production and as a highly urbanized and industrial center with low unemployment. The city's economic and cultural vibrancy, however, comes with costs: the loss of open spaces, reduced biodiversity, gentrification, and the impoverishment of many early residents, migrants who had moved to Tijuana from the South of the country in search of social mobility. Some of those residents were pursuing a distinctly Mexican dream, while others were trying to cross to the other side in pursuit of the elusive American dream. Rihan Yeh's first book is an essential read for

anyone interested in the production of social hierarchies in global borders.

In *Passing: Two Publics in a Mexican Border City*, Yeh significantly recasts Tijuana's contemporary social history by unpacking the complex identities that Tijuana's *clase media* (middle class) and the *pueblo* (the people) have been compelled to display to win recognition in local public spaces after the social, political, and cultural transformations of the 1980s. Well-established members of the middle classes seek to amass the required cultural capital that will solidify their social position and perhaps even grant them access to the spaces previously reserved for the wealthy: gated communities, country clubs, or shopping malls in the United States. For the *pueblo*, by contrast, adhering to expected social norms and learning to navigate the intricate systems of patronage politics is simply a matter of survival. For this marginalized population, often deprived of rights and decent housing, passing as law-abiding citizens is crucial to avoid the police violence or incarceration that could further threaten their perilous existence.

This book carefully documents more than a decade of fieldwork conducted in Tijuana in a variety of settings across different socioeconomic strata, including factories, *colonias populares*, the US consular office, ports of entry, social protests,

and the local country club. Using extended ethnographic vignettes, Yeh offers a closer look at the multiple ways in which *Tijuanaenses* make citizenship claims, how they locate and contextualize their sense of social, cultural, and local belonging, and their complex attachments to the papers permitting them to move back and forth across borderlands, real and imagined. Through these vignettes, we perceive the multiple meanings of living in a quintessential borderland space. Yeh covers not only the political but also the cultural aspects of the borderland. For example, a chapter of the book is devoted to new interpretations of popular music, placing special emphasis on the musical production of Los Tigres del Norte and los Tucanes de Tijuana.

Yeh presents a convincing argument that in postcolonial societies, Habermas' incipient public sphere is reserved for those who can claim membership to a small sector of the middle class and the cosmopolitan elites. In Tijuana, multiple publics struggle to have their voices heard and to gain inclusion as full citizens. The author calls this collection of voices the "hearsay public," an aggregation of shadow conversations that create a public-making genre. In the book, hearsay public expressions are characterized, for example, by a bestselling exposé written by a professional gunman, corrido music, public demonstrations, posters, and intimate interviews with people from all walks of life. Despite the vibrancy of this ubiquitous "hearsay public," readers will be convinced of the impossibility of building a Habermasian rational consensus that is based on the liberal concept of a deliberative society. In Yeh's account, we clearly observe that only a very small slice of Tijuana's middle class is granted the tenuous

privilege of inclusion: to have their voices heard in public debates that may influence state policy.

Straddling linguistic and sociocultural anthropology, the book offers a fresh interpretation of social class locations and dislocations in neoliberal temporalities and analyzes print media and popular music. However, we are left wondering about the relationships the *pueblo* creates to compensate for their lack of voice in the public sphere. While the book successfully presents a complex portrait of Tijuana as a city of migrants who have adapted to the stratification, privileges, and hierarchies arising from its borderland status, we are left with the idea that these subjects passively accept their fate and can only defend themselves using the weapons of the weak to guarantee their individual survival. In Yeh's interpretation of public voices, there's no place for civil society because the processes of mutual recognition shaping the larger public sphere have failed to incorporate the *pueblo* since the 1980s, thus dampening or silencing their voice.

Yeh sees the liberal concept of civil society as reserved for the middle class. Moreover, in her view, the left is generally feeble in Tijuana, and the corporativism needed to build a classic political patronage system is almost inexistent. However, the rigid boundaries that delineate social class and status in Tijuana are not very useful for imagining the mechanisms that supported the sweeping victory of the left in 2018. In Tijuana, MORENA, a six-year-old leftist political party that sought to create a more egalitarian society by organizing horizontally and from below, captured a majority in the 2018 presidential election and the gubernatorial election the following year. While electoral participation in

Tijuana's districts barely surpassed 50 percent of the electorate in the presidential election of 2018, the substantive participation is nonetheless respectable for a place that has been historically considered a city of passing with a substantial transient, dis-

enfranchised population. In the multiple "hearsay public" narratives included in the book, one wishes the audience could learn more about "hearsay public" discourse on community building and how to find, and amplify, their lost voices.