The Importance of Space and Latina Audiences

The primary focus of my fieldwork was the intersection between Latinidad, gender, and media, but as the interviews evolved, the city of Chicago also became a general theme. During my fieldwork, especially between 2005 and 2008, participants were very concerned with Chicago's rapid gentrification against the backdrop of the city's history of racial segregation. Gentrification integrated some neighborhoods, especially on the North Side, while also heightening segregation when Latina/os were forced to move into the suburbs due to the rising cost of housing in the city (Alicea 2001; Mumm 2008; Pérez 2004; Ramos-Zayas 2001). Some participants noted that in neighborhoods that were undergoing change, their bodies were perceived as outsiders or insiders depending on the level of gentrification in that particular area. The city's changing ethno-landscape became one of the main lenses through which Latina audiences in Chicago made sense of local and national images of Latina womanhood.

This chapter demonstrates the significance of space and place in audience studies, despite its absence in reception theory. Using three case studies of media representations, I show that issues of representation and recognition continue to be paramount to underrepresented audiences. Building on arguments about race, ethnicity, and beauty outlined earlier in the book, this chapter illustrates that mediated citizenship not only is of national salience but also is very locally situated. Overall, it offers a unique glimpse into how Latina audiences seek indications of belonging, representation, and citizenship within both local and national media. More specifically, I argue that they read media through local struggles over citizenship, including intra-Latina relations, gentrification, and displacement.
The local is undertheorized in audience studies. Media are often assumed to be untethered from physical space, since media can be exported globally, and with the availability of mobile digital technologies such as the smartphone, media can theoretically be consumed anywhere. However, media consumption is still a very local process—a person must be situated somewhere when watching, listening to, or reading a text (Couldry and McCarthy 2004). In other words, that person’s specific location always factors into how she or he makes sense of media. One notable exception to the dearth of scholarship on media audiences and the built environment is Myria Georgiou’s (2006) study of Greek Cypriots in New York and London. Georgiou explores the spatial dimensions within audiences’ consumption patterns, taking into account the home (i.e., their domestic space), their new city, and the transnational imagination of her diasporic participants. Georgiou argues that media cuts across these real and imagined spaces, and in doing so creates and maintains transnational communities among Greek Cypriots.

Other audience researchers situate their studies within a local space, such as the work of Vicki Mayer (2003b) with Mexican American youth in San Antonio, Texas, and Kristin Moran (2011) with Mexican American families in San Diego, California, but the media texts discussed by those audiences are national and transnational in nature, not depictions of the local area. And yet we must take into consideration that media texts that focus on a particular locality can be very salient to audiences who are trying to make sense of their place within the nation.

This chapter examines how space factors into Latina audiences’ reception of local, national, and global representations of Latina femininity. I use three case studies to illustrate how Latina audiences make claims to citizenship vis-à-vis very local understandings of gender, ethnicity, class, and space. The first case study calls attention to how Latina audiences’ engagement with iconic Latina celebrities such as Jennifer Lopez, Salma Hayek, and Selena is informed by local intra-Latina relations among Mexican and Puerto Rican women that challenge media constructions of a homogeneous Latinidad. The second case study explores the reception of cinematic representations of Puerto Rican Chicago in the films Chicago Boricua (2004) and Nothing Like the Holidays (2008). Whereas in other chapters I draw exclusively from ethnographic data collected during my fieldwork, in this section I supplement the discussion with audience feedback posted online on IMDb, Amazon, and Netflix. These websites are of course another space—a virtual one. Online commentary differs from face-to-face communication in its anonymity and in that it is preserved in a public archive. The third case study examines the
American Girl doll Marisol Luna, released in late 2004. Marisol and the accompanying book about her were sold globally, but the doll's story is situated in the historically Mexican neighborhood of Pilsen in Chicago. As all three of the case studies detailed in this chapter illustrate, the local figures into how Latina audiences make sense of their place in the larger media landscape and within the nation as citizens.

**Locating Latinas in Chicago vis-à-vis Latina Icons**

There is a specific configuration of Latinidad in Chicago. The city has been home to many different Latin American immigrants since at least the early twentieth century, but Mexicans and Puerto Ricans continue to constitute the overwhelming majority of Latina/os in Chicago. Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in Chicago have a history of what Felix Padilla (1985) calls “Latino ethnic consciousness,” a situational pan-ethnic identity that is sometimes taken on by Latina/os based on shared experiences of inequality. Padilla documented that while the city’s Latina/os often identified ethnically as their specific nationality (e.g., Mexican or Puerto Rican), they might sometimes choose to identify as Latina/o in order to make political claims and organize significant coalitions among Latina/os based on commonalities such as the Spanish language and the experience of racial discrimination. It is important to note these groups’ very different histories of (im)migration. Many Mexicans in Chicago traveled north to the city only after first migrating to Texas, for example. Whereas Mexican immigrants arrive in Chicago as noncitizens (though they might become naturalized citizens later), Puerto Ricans are already U.S. citizens due to Puerto Rico’s status as a U.S. territory. This particular history of “Latino ethnic consciousness” among Mexicans and Puerto Ricans informs not only how Latina audiences in Chicago make sense of media images of Latinas, but also how Latinas make sense of one another.

In order to tease out the specific intra-Latina relations among women of Mexican and Puerto Rican origin in Chicago, I focus on the reception of two Latina celebrities, Jennifer Lopez and Salma Hayek. The participants talked about other Latina stars as well, including Eva Mendes, America Ferrera, Eva Longoria, Zoe Saldaña, Judy Reyes, Selena Gomez, Demi Lovato, Sofia Vergara, and Gina Rodriguez, but Lopez, Hayek, and Selena were the most frequently discussed. This is due to their intergenerational appeal and long-standing presence in mainstream and Spanish-language media. Although Selena died in 1995, she remains popular among both very young and older audiences. In late 2016, more than twenty years after her death, the cosmetics
giant MAC launched a makeup line inspired by Selena that sold out immediately. Lopez and Hayek not only have continued their careers in front of the camera, but they also have their own production companies (Nuyorican Productions and Ventanarosa, respectively), and thus wield some power in the television and film industries. I found that the bodies of these icons of Latina womanhood function as sites of struggle and contestation over Latina femininity and intraethnic relations among Latinas. In particular, the women I encountered used the Puerto Rican Lopez and the Mexican Hayek along with other Latina signifiers to express both their similarities to and their differences from women of other nationalities. Overall, the way that Lopez and Hayek are received suggests that Latinas’ perceptions of one another are (partially) mediated through their readings of such iconic Latinas in popular culture.

For the study participants, media representations came to be a way of knowing the “Other,” so to speak. All of the participants articulated some solidarity with other Latinas despite differences in nationality, class, age, or sexual orientation, largely because they saw a commonality in how Latinas are often misrepresented in mainstream media—as oversexed, uneducated, poor, and with little to offer society. All of the women embraced “pan-Latinaness” to a certain degree through identifying with other Latinas (including those of different nationalities). However, those affinities were not always based on lived experiences with other Latinas. Luz mentioned that she enjoyed reading Latina magazine because “I just like the fact that they show Latin women of all—of every country . . . they have a little bit of everything. You get a feeling for not only your culture, but everybody else’s culture in Latin America.” Luz explained that she learned about Santeria, usually associated with Spanish Caribbean Latinas/os, in one of the magazine’s articles and now does not think “that it’s a bad thing.” Katynka Zazueta Martínez (2004, 2008) argues in her research on the magazine Latina that this publication has the potential both to reinforce a homogeneous portrait of Latinidad and to foster a sense of cultural citizenship among its readers based on this unified identity. The magazine provided Luz with a window into understanding non-Mexican Latinas and perhaps laid the groundwork for building future solidarities.

On the other hand, many of the participants contested the homogeneous ways in which Latinas/os are depicted as a mass of Spanish-speaking, perpetually foreign people. In response to these perceptions, some of the women sought to differentiate themselves from one another in terms of nationality. Several argued that Lopez represents herself as more “sexually open,” specifically through her provocative dress, because she is Puerto Rican. Yvette,
who is Mexican, made this argument, claiming that “Puerto Rican women tend to be more sexually liberated and assertive.” Likewise, Lydia, who also is Mexican, said that Mexican women were generally perceived among Latina/os to be “submissive, motherly, and docile,” whereas Puerto Rican women were seen as “more independent and aggressive.” Many of the women of Mexican origin perceived Puerto Ricans to be more “Americanized,” arguing that when they migrate to the United States, they are more like their white female counterparts, “las Americanas,” whom they also understand to be more “sexually liberated.” Lilia Fernández (2004) finds this likening of Puerto Rican women to Anglo women to have been evident earlier on in the post–World War II period, when female migrants from Puerto Rico were viewed as more “cosmopolitan.” Many of the participants made references to Puerto Rican women as being more voluptuous than Mexican women, with wide hips and large buttocks. This form of Othering mirrors Gina Pérez’s (2003) findings in her research in Chicago, where Mexican women were often referred to as “sufrídas” (suffering; read: docile, passive) and Puerto Rican women as “rencorosas” (resentful; read: aggressive). These comparisons among Latinas of differing nationalities are also very similar to Ana Yolanda Ramos-Zayas’s (2012) findings in Newark, New Jersey, where Brazilian, Colombian, and Puerto Rican women are assumed to be more curvaceous, and therefore more attractive, than Mexican and Ecuadorian women.

Lydia even made a distinction between Mexicans and Puerto Ricans based on where in the city many of these two groups reside:

As far as neighborhoods go, because we’re so segregated here in Chicago, I think the heavily populated Mexican, Mexican American areas are very family centered, and it tends to be a population of so many kids . . . this is more the Southwest Side compared to the North Side. They’re mostly single-family homes, so that’s a big difference because you have your yard. For the most part . . . You generally have more room. And I think up north, in general, it’s more constricted. There’s more apartment buildings . . . But I think that everyone on top of each other is—I wouldn’t consider it easy to raise a family in an apartment where you don’t have a yard or something of that nature. So, and Humboldt Park being predominantly a Puerto Rican neighborhood, and Logan Square as well. I think there’s a lot of apartments. That and there’s a lot of gentrification; being displaced has a big impact on the community. So . . . I think the displacement of the family, or the lack of family or structure or what you consider a home, I think that has a lot to do with when someone says it’s [Humboldt Park] more urban [than the southwest], I guess, or they would say ghetto even though both areas have their problems throughout Chicago.
In differentiating between Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in this way, Lydia was suggesting that Mexicans are more family oriented and thus live on the South Side of Chicago in residential areas where there are many houses. On the other hand, she placed Puerto Ricans on the North Side, living chiefly in apartments, and facing gentrification, which not only displaces them physically but also erodes their family ties. This participant thus attempted to distinguish Puerto Ricans from Mexicans in terms of space/geography (where one lives within the city) and theorized that this creates differences in degrees of family orientation.

Also revealing is that the participants in one interview, who were college students of Mexican origin, viewed Hayek as a more “authentic” Latina than Lopez. The notion of authenticity echoes in other media discourses, including conflicts between the entertainers themselves. In particular, these discourses suggest that Hayek, having been born in Mexico, is seen as more authentic than Lopez, who was born in the United States, because of the former’s original Mexican citizenship (only in 2013 did she receive U.S. citizenship) and accent. Isabel Molina-Guzmán and Angharad Valdivia (2004) argue that these debates over authenticity are directly related to the different ways in which Lopez and Hayek’s sexuality has been racialized. “Unlike Lopez,” they write, “whose sexualized image primarily foregrounds her racialized booty, sexualized representations of Hayek center on her body as the stereotyped performance of Latina femininity” (212). The reading of Hayek as more “authentic” is further reinforced by the background of one of the ads discussed in the interviews, featuring a building that resembles a “hacienda” in either Latin America or the U.S. Southwest (see figure 11, p. 122). The “hacienda” background invokes the “Spanish fantasy heritage,” to use a term coined in the 1940s by journalist Carey McWilliams (1948). This echo of the “Spanish fantasy heritage” traps Mexican Americans in the past, in a romantic, pastoral setting in Mexico or missionary California, and does not locate them in the present. In this way, these women simultaneously rejected notions of Latina authenticity in popular culture, yet at the same time were invested in their own definitions of Latina femininity as embodied in Hayek and located in a nostalgic, colonial past.

Notably, all of the Puerto Rican and Mexi-Rican women identified more with Lopez than the Mexican (American) women did. While these women still criticized her to some extent, they nonetheless expressed some affinity with her. Perhaps this was the case not only because of a common nationality, but also because most of the Puerto Rican and Mexi-Rican women I worked with are second or third generation, as compared to most of the
Mexican (American) women, who are first and second generation. Several of the Mexican (American) women compared Lopez to Hayek, arguing that the latter is more “decent,” “covered up,” and a “good role model.” Though these women explicitly expressed class identification with Hayek because she embodies many of their desires for upward mobility, it can be speculated that they also identified with her because of her representation of Mexican femininity. This is significant because *mexicanidad* is often marginalized in representations of Latinidad in mainstream popular culture despite Mexicans’ hypervisibility in Spanish-language media (Aparicio 2011). I also want to suggest that these identifications with Hayek, and the distancing and critique of Lopez, might be based more on ethnic identification with the entertainer as a Mexican woman than on her actually being less hypersexual than Lopez, considering that Hayek has played a spitfire in many of her earlier films (e.g., *From Dusk till Dawn* [1996], *Fools Rush In* [1997], and *Wild Wild West* [1999]). The advertisement in figure 11 furthers this notion by offering a more conservative image of the actress compared to her representations in cinema. In particular, perhaps the preference for Hayek can also be explained by the trend in mainstream popular culture that has resulted in few Mexican (American) women’s bodies being celebrated compared to Puerto Rican women, so that this identification with Hayek may therefore be read as a response to the erasure of *mexicanidad*.

The responses of the women I interviewed are intimately tied to Chicago’s particular history as a site of Latinidad among both Mexicans and Puerto Ricans—the two largest and oldest groups in the city, who have lived together for at least five generations. It is therefore not coincidental that these two groups were discussed in relation to one another. In fact, although my sample included Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Colombians, and many mixed Latinas (including Mexi-Ricans, Puerto Rican/Peruvians, and Mexican/Peruvians)—what Frances Aparicio (2009) calls “the hybrid of the hybrids”—references to Latinidad were almost always made in relation to this Mexican/Puerto Rican binary. Though Chicago is becoming increasingly more diverse in its Latina/o population, especially with the influx of Guatemalan refugees, Latinidad is still understood within the boundaries of *mexicanidad* and *puertorriqueñidad*.

Furthermore, on a more disparaging note, the women’s responses reify the dominant tropes of feminine Latinidad within mainstream media, that is, the binary of the hypervisible tropicalized, oversized Latina and the (in) visible, often undocumented female immigrant who is usually coded as Mexican. Equally important, these representations of Mexican and Puerto Rican
women reproduce local and national institutional efforts to segregate these two groups and place them in competition with one another.

These findings are consistent with those of anthropologists Nicholas De Genova and Ana Yolanda Ramos-Zayas (2003) and Gina Pérez (2003), who argue that representations of Latinidad may reinscribe hierarchies among Latina/o communities instead of producing a more homogeneous identity, as scholars such as Frances Aparicio (2003) and Frances Negrón-Muntaner (1997) suggest. De Genova and Ramos-Zayas (2003) found that Puerto Ricans in Chicago use Puerto Rican icons to invert the power relations within Latinidad. In particular, they found that their Puerto Rican participants used the attention given to Lopez's body in the mainstream press to assert a Puerto Rican “superiority of female beauty and sensuousness” (91). In the mid-1990s, the casting of Lopez to play the title role in the biopic Selena elicited an outcry from the Mexican American community because the actress is not of Mexican descent (Aparicio 2003; Paredez 2009). In contrast, according to De Genova and Ramos-Zayas (2003, 19), “For many Puerto Rican viewers of Lopez's cinematic representation of Selena, Selena's Mexicanness was effectively trumped and thus erased by Lopez's Puerto Rican womanhood.” In this case, Puerto Rican audiences used a strategy of ethnocentrism mapped onto the female body to articulate that they were more “worthy” than Mexicans to be visible in mainstream media.

Similarly, Mérida Rúa (2012), in her ethnographic research on Puerto Ricans making community in the Logan Square neighborhood of Chicago, found that one of her participants, Otilia, “harassed” her friends to support the Puerto Rican (female) candidates in a talent contest on a Spanish-language television station. Rúa notes that Otilia “successfully advocated for Millie [the Puerto Rican candidate] on the first Protagonista de novela who she felt was repeatedly singled out because of her dark complexion and Puerto Rican Spanish—two characteristics usually neutralized in (re)presentations of Latinos on Spanish-language television” (120). Hence, Otilia disrupted an undifferentiated Latinidad (in this case as represented on television) in her cultural nationalism expressed as her desire for the Puerto Rican candidate to win. These examples illustrate that Latina/o audiences' readings of media images of Latinas are shaped by interethnic tensions inherent within Latinidad as inscribed in the specific ethnoscape of Chicago.1

These struggles over representation illustrate a particular kind of citizenship situated in the politics of representation. Participants’ identification and disidentification with Latina icons such as Lopez and Hayek demonstrate that the mediated Latina body functions within a woman-as-nation trope
(in this case, a woman-as-pan-ethnicity trope) as a site of struggle (Beltrán 2002; Cepeda 2003), signifying the tensions within Latinidad. Moreover, these audience responses disrupt the homogeneous ways in which Latinidad is constructed within media and academic discourses and instead demonstrate the competing identities within this pan-ethnicity and the "radical hybridity" of Latina/os (Valdivia 2003b), or the fact that Latinas range so widely in terms of race, ethnicity, class, religion, generation, and language that it would be very difficult to make any generalizations about them. At the same time, Latina/o-oriented media, especially bilingual media aimed at Latinas living in the United States (in contrast to Spanish-language media created for Latin American audiences), can educate audiences about other Latina/o ethnicities.

In conclusion, the participants demonstrated how Latinas of differing nationalities come to know one another, and more specifically, how they imagine the "Other" vis-a-vis Latina media icons. Latina audiences in Chicago have conflicted relationships with Lopez and Hayek, and discussions of these icons elicit insights into how intra-Latina relations operate in the United States. Both the politics of Lopez's and Hayek's bodies and the city of Chicago figured prominently in the participants' discourses and framed the ways in which the women talked about their own identity formation in relation to other Latinas in Chicago. While I primarily highlighted how the women use these media texts to differentiate themselves from one another, it is imperative to understand that at the same time they all identified as Latina and expressed a concern for and solidarity with other Latinas. Intraethnic relations among Latinas thus function through both conflict and cooperation. These responses are intimately tied to the fact that Chicago has a particular history of both conflict and solidarity between Mexicans and Puerto Ricans (De Genova and Ramos-Zayas 2003; Fernández 2012a; Padilla 1985), and it is therefore not a coincidence that these two ethnic groups were discussed in relation to one another. Ultimately, these relations are embedded in the particular ethnoracial landscape of Chicago and remapped onto both symbolic (or iconic) and material bodies.

Cinematic Representations of Puerto Rican Chicago

Puerto Ricans in Chicago are one of the largest segments within the Puerto Rican diaspora, yet there are few representations of Puerto Rican Chicago in cinema. This section explores the reception of two contemporary feature films, Chicago Boricua (2004) and Nothing Like the Holidays (2008), that
foreground the Puerto Rican diasporic experience in Chicago. The question with which I am primarily concerned is, how do Puerto Rican audiences in Chicago make sense of the narrative and images? I focus my attention specifically on Puerto Rican audiences because they remain highly understudied within both media studies and Latina/o studies. Analyzing the reception of both films, I find that while they may be problematic in their depictions of "authentic Puerto Rican-ness," they nonetheless bear the burden of representation for Puerto Rican Chicago, where audiences both celebrate and distance themselves from these films.

Chicago Boricua, an independent film, premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival in 2004 and was later distributed by Universal. Writer and director Marisol Torres Adler’s first feature film, it focuses on the lives of three characters: Tata, a young Anglo woman who desperately wants to be Puerto Rican and runs for the Puerto Rican Day parade queen beauty pageant; Willie, a young Puerto Rican drug dealer and the romantic interest of Lola (played by Aimee Garcia), who is a studious and independent Puerto Rican college
student; and Germán, who recently started a job at a predominantly Anglo real estate firm. Filmed in the Humboldt Park neighborhood of Chicago, which is home to a highly visible Puerto Rican community, the film largely deals with issues of race, ethnicity, gender, class, and nationalism within the Puerto Rican community.

Although *Chicago Boricua* won the Audience Favorite Award at the Chicago Film Festival, my reception research suggests that Puerto Rican audiences had more complicated and contested responses. Not surprisingly, many of the audience members criticized the film for reproducing “negative” representations of Puerto Ricans as uneducated and crass. This finding is akin to work among minority audiences by Elizabeth Bird (2003), Robin Means Coleman (2000), and Marie Gillespie (1995), where the subjects’ dominant response is one of dismay at the symbolic annihilation (Tuchman 1979) of their communities. In particular, many of the audiences’ responses were framed in terms of offense, shame, and insult. For example, one audience member, posting under the user name Unknown Elks on Amazon, said, “This [Chicago Boricua] is a complete embarrassment to all Puerto Ricans.” PR Stallion, also on Amazon, said, “This movie is an insult to our loving culture.” A reviewer on Netflix stated, “This movie is a disgrace to the Puerto Rican people living in the USA.” Lastly, a reviewer on Netflix said, “Garbage!!! I am puertorican. I feel insulted.” One of my Puerto Rican participants, Misha, who herself was an aspiring actress in Chicago, expressed the same sentiment saying, “It’s just so disrespectful.” Ironically, Misha, after not being able to find much work, would later play the role of the “hot sexy mama in a red dress” as an extra in *Nothing Like the Holidays*, a point I revisit in chapter 3.

What is significant here, in contrast to previous studies of minority audiences, is the pride and nationalism embedded in their responses. In particular, the desire for recognition is key to their readings of *Chicago Boricua*. As numerous Puerto Rican studies scholars have illustrated, among them Frances Negrón-Muntaner and Ramon Grosfoguel (1997) and Lorrin Thomas (2010), cultural representations are particularly salient for Puerto Ricans because of Puerto Rico’s long-standing ambivalent and colonial status. Representation and recognition are therefore paramount in Puerto Rican cultural politics.

*Nothing Like the Holidays*, written and directed by seasoned directors Rick Najera and Alfredo de Villa, was released in the winter of 2008 and debuted at number seven in its opening week, grossing over $3.5 million at the box office. Also filmed in Humboldt Park, the film spotlights a Puerto Rican family coming together over the holidays. The main characters are the parents,
Ana and Edy Rodriguez, who appear to be on the verge of divorce; Jesse, their youngest son, who just returned from a tour in Iraq; their daughter, Rosanna, who is a struggling actress living in Los Angeles; and their eldest son, Mauricio, and his Jewish wife, Sarah, who are successful professionals in New York. Unlike Chicago Boricua, the film features a well-known cast, including John Leguizamo, Elizabeth Peña, Alfredo Molina, Jay Hernandez, and Freddy Rodriguez. It is also worth noting that there are major differences between the two films in terms of aesthetics (including the use of instrumental hip hop in the opening of Chicago Boricua and Ricky Martin's "La Bomba" in Nothing Like the Holidays) and production values (Nothing Like the Holidays is slicker and more polished, for example, because it was made with a larger budget).

In comparison to Chicago Boricua, for which I found no critical reviews, as a mainstream film Nothing Like the Holidays received a number of lukewarm reviews from prominent critics, including Roger Ebert, and major publications such as the New York Times, and the Washington Post. Most
critics praised the acting and cinematography, but lamented the formulaic storyline, which revolves around family tensions during the holidays. Only Ebert (2008), writing for the Chicago Sun Times, recognized that while the film does rely on particular formulas, it is very specific in its focus on a Puerto Rican family in Humboldt Park. This was how the majority of the audiences I studied saw the film. While I was completing ethnographic fieldwork in Chicago in late 2007, the community in Humboldt Park was ecstatic about the local filming. After the film was released, many were excited about the representation of the neighborhood—a place that has received little national media attention. In fact, while many complained that the film was formulaic (often comparing it to The Family Stone [2005]), what made Nothing Like the Holidays unique and significant to them was its focus on the Puerto Rican community in Humboldt Park. One audience member said, "This is wonderful insight [in]to the life of Puerto Ricans in [the] Humboldt Park community area in Chicago. Humboldt Park is lovingly portrayed in the film—it is the Puerto Rican neighborhood in Chicago" (Netflix). Another Chicago Puerto Rican said: "You always get excited about movies filmed in your hometown, and this was all the buzz when it was filmed here" (Netflix).

Echoing the excitement about a local production about Puerto Ricans, one Netflix reviewer stated:

finally a movie is made about my home place in chicago. i was born and rise in humboldt park until left for puerto rico in 2002... the movie was wonderful... nothing like the holiday bring a lot of joys and tears into eyes as i see my homeplace turn into a romance, comedy and heart warm and the traditional puerto rican food in west chicago... i give it a 9 for showing the whole world how great we are in a very hard place to be happy. (tommy61986-1)

Interestingly, the majority of Puerto Rican Chicagoans viewed the film as realistic in its representation of “Puerto Rican traditions and customs” and the rather lively (read: loud) family dynamic. They praised the family-oriented tone of the film, the casting and acting, and the very specific shots of Humboldt Park. An Amazon reviewer with the user name “reality chic” says:

When my husband and I saw this movie, we just couldn't believe it. We both grew up on the south side of Chicago, and we do go to Humboldt Park for various things (this is where a lot or most of the outdoor scenes were filmed). The reality of the storyline is unbelievable. Every one I grew up with was the same way. We swear we were looking at a mirror image of our lives on the
screen. This movie hit home in a big way... This film is really down to earth and accurate.

Overall, compared to *Chicago Boricua*, *Nothing Like the Holidays* was well received by Puerto Rican audiences in Chicago due to its casting of well-known actors, its less stereotypical characters (particularly the lower-middle-class characters), and its representation of Humboldt Park as a tight-knit community versus one overwhelmed by drugs and violence. Both films elicited a strong response because of their specific location in Humboldt Park—arguably the center of Puerto Rican life in Chicago. Because Chicago Puerto Ricans are so underrepresented in film and other media, the politics of a localized recognition in cinema becomes highly salient for Latina/o audiences. It indicates that we need to take a closer look at representation and recognition—something that we as cultural studies and media studies scholars find so obvious and take so much for granted that we have not fully theorized it within reception studies even though audiences are indicating that this is one of the main frames through which they read media texts. Indeed, as Gregg Barrios (1985) says of Chicano cinema and Katynka Zazueta Martinez (2008) argues of more pan-Latina/o responses to Latina/o film, reception of these films point to a “cinema of hunger,” with audiences trying to identify with the few representations of their communities while yearning for more. Ultimately, using Puerto Rican Chicago as a case study allows us to further understand how issues of center and periphery are negotiated within and outside cinema.

“I'm Marisol... an American Girl”

On January 1, 2005, the American Girl Doll Company released its “Girl of the Year,” a doll named Marisol Luna. Operated by the Pleasant Company, American Girl attempts to offer ethnically and racially diverse dolls that are grounded in history, and Marisol is part of the company’s line of contemporary girls. The doll was packaged with a book that tells her story. Written by Gary Soto, a Chicano children's author from Fresno, California, it follows ten-year-old Marisol as she moves with her family from the primarily working-class and Mexican American neighborhood of Pilsen in Chicago to Des Plaines, a middle-class, predominantly white suburb. The book immediately elicited protests from Latina/os in Chicago because of what they viewed as its unfair portrayal of both Pilsen and the Latina/o community itself.

The tension in the plot begins when Marisol’s parents decide to move out of Pilsen because it is too “dangerous.” Marisol struggles with the thought of leaving the community with which she is familiar and in which she is estab-
lished, and she is particularly upset about having to leave her dance school after she finds out that there is not a similar school in Des Plaines. She eventually is able to convince her neighbor, a professional dancer named Miss Mendoza, to come along with the family to the suburbs and open her own school there. Through tropes of Chicago as excessively ethnic and working class, the book constructs the city as unsafe. Through Marisol’s entry into the middle class as experienced by her move to the suburbs, it details a gendered rite of passage into womanhood.

The controversy that Marisol’s story generated provides a case study on how tensions surrounding the politics of representation are negotiated in contemporary images of Latina femininity. Like Latinidad, girl culture has also been interpellated by niche marketing focused on selling difference (Valdivia 2009). Prior to Marisol, American Girl produced only one other Latina doll, Josefina Montoya, who was from New Mexico. Because Josefina is in the historical line of dolls and her story is set in 1848, when New Mexico became part of the United States, she is largely viewed by consumers as Mexican and not as American (Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel 2002). This section explores the politics of representation at stake in the making, the marketing, and most importantly the reception of Marisol, paying particular attention
to issues of belonging, recognition, and citizenship. In particular, I build on Jennifer Domino Rudolph’s (2009) argument that “Marisol became an object on which to inscribe competing ethnic and class identities and ideals” (72) and Nicole Guidotti-Hernández’s (2007) contention that figures in children’s media (in this case Dora the Explorer) can model global forms of citizenship that are raced and gendered. Latinas’ reception of the Marisol doll and book suggests that Marisol operates as a contested text whereby audiences struggle over gender, race, representation, and citizenship within a localized space.

Upon the release of Marisol, Latina/o activists in Chicago began mobilizing protests against American Girl, claiming that the book cast Pilsen and the Latina/o community in a negative light, as something that is undesirable and to be fled. During my fieldwork in 2005, I attended one protest at the American Girl Place in downtown Chicago, a department store that not only sells American Girl dolls and their accessories, but also provides fine dining and beauty salon services for its young customers. The demonstration was led by Latina/o high school students from the Rudy Lozano Leadership Academy and Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos High School, alternative high schools in Pilsen and Humboldt Park, respectively, who were demanding that because the American Girl Company was profiting from using Pilsen to situate its story, it should “give back” to the community’s youth through employment/internship positions and scholarships. The company responded in a press release that it did not “intend to offend anyone,” claiming that the character of Marisol is moved from Pilsen to the suburbs because the traffic in the city makes it dangerous for her to play outside. The company did not respond to the students’ requests.

Only a handful of the participants in this study actually purchased the Marisol doll during the time of my fieldwork. Most of them had never read the accompanying book, but instead interpreted the doll through two other sources: (1) the story as constructed by local activists rallying against Marisol’s narrative and the subsequent media coverage both in support of and against the doll, and (2) American Girl’s marketing, especially its magalogue featuring Marisol. With respect to the first source, Domino Rudolph (2009) found that protestors and some Latina/o community members in Pilsen and surrounding neighborhoods interpreted the doll and the book in very particular ways: “The Marisol narrative became a metaphor for the real-life exodus of Pilsen’s Mexican community due to increasing housing costs and property taxes” (74). In other words, these community members’ reception of Marisol was filtered through the gentrification taking place within the neighborhood. Domino Rudolph’s findings illustrate a more oppositional reading of Marisol, which challenges and questions the dominant ideologies (including the privileging of
middle-class values and spaces) embedded in the doll's narrative. Some of the women in this study shared these oppositional readings, but most had more negotiated or preferred readings, partly because they also interpreted Marisol through American Girl’s promotional materials.

Aside from American Girl stores in major cities, one of the primary ways the company sells its dolls is through mail order via a print magalogue. According to the catalogue from early 2005, “Marisol Luna brings to life the story of a girl who was born to dance. When Marisol’s family moves from Chicago to the suburbs, her passion for dancing helps her persevere in the face of change.” Visually Marisol has a light brown skin tone with long, light brown hair and brown eyes. She wears a purple crocheted beanie hat along with a purple long-sleeved shirt, green cargo capri pants, a multicolored scarf, and a gold chain. She holds a cell phone in her right hand. In keeping with the book, Marisol’s identity is largely centered on dance. The Latina body in movement through dancing is a dominant way that Latinas have been represented in mainstream popular culture, especially in Hollywood (Peña Ovalle 2011; Valdivia 2009). In addition to the news coverage and subsequent protests, most of the participants in this study read Marisol through the lens of the catalogue, as most of the women had not purchased the doll or visited the American Girl Place.

Key to this study is that the reception of Marisol was varied. While Domino Rudolph (2009) focuses her study on oppositional readings of Marisol by protestors, the participants in my study had more negotiated readings of the doll and her narrative. About a fourth of the women sided with the protestors problematizing Marisol’s narrative of urban flight to the suburbs. Twenty-nine-year-old Elena, who was a graduate student at the time, was very aware of the tensions surrounding Marisol, largely because one of her classmates was involved in the protest and because she was familiar with American Girl through her niece. Elena argued the following about Marisol’s story:

The whole image that there’s a Latino community that is really not a good community, and that because of that it’s always a kind of American dream aspiring to get into a more white, affluent type of neighborhood. It’s like the neighborhood that has your community, your people, isn’t really the best community, and you need to strive for something better. I think that’s what she represents. Trying to get that kind of social mobility. It’s like you can only move up if you move out. You can’t move up and stay with your old community. I think to me American Girl in general is so—I mean, my niece has one of these dolls, and I told my brother what were you thinking. I think it is this whole cute girl, pretty clothes, just teaching girls that you need to look
a certain way in order to appeal to other people, and I think they recognize that there’s a market we’re missing here, and if we want to hit more Latinas then we need to appeal to them.

While some women, like Elena, had an oppositional stance toward Marisol, at least half of the women expressed excitement about being able to purchase a Latina doll. Marisol, a twenty-seven-year-old Mexican/Puerto Rican homemaker, remarked that “some people want to move out of the city to the suburbs” and that she planned to buy the doll, since Marisol “looks a lot like my daughter.” This sentiment stems from the scarcity of dolls of color in preceding doll lines. Parents and psychologists have placed value on dolls as racialized and gendered objects that girls not only play with but also identify with, which may affect their self-esteem. These concerns are especially salient for girls of color, given that whiteness is part and parcel of the dominant beauty ideal. While Elizabeth Chin (2001) demonstrates that children’s actual consumption of dolls is more complicated because black girls appropriate Barbie in ways that are particular to African American aesthetics, dolls are cultural objects that can symbolize nation, race, ethnicity, and gender. As Frances Negrón-Muntaner (2004) suggests in her analysis of the reception of the Puerto Rican Barbie among Puerto Ricans on the island and the mainland, dolls can serve as a platform for the public to debate national, racial, ethnic, and gender identities. Given the salience of dolls in cultural politics, merely having the option to purchase a doll of color like Marisol was a consumer choice that many of the participants celebrated. Indeed, having the consumer choice to buy a Latina doll for a Latina girl trumped some of the women’s concerns with this particular doll’s narrative.

While many of the women praised American Girl for including a Latina doll, some also lamented that Marisol is expensive and out of reach for many poor and working-class Latina/o families. At $84 for the doll and book (accessories are sold separately), Marisol is more costly than other popular doll lines like Barbie and Bratz. As Chin (2001) finds with poor and working-class black girls, dolls of color are often designed as correctives for racial exclusion, and yet ironically these dolls are often unaffordable for the girls the lines target. In other words, while dolls such as Marisol purport to be inclusive of nonwhite girls, the cost makes them unattainable for poor and working-class girls of color who might desire dolls that look like them. When I facilitated a media literacy workshop with Latina preteens at a local community-based organization in Pilsen, I found that while almost all of the twenty girls there knew about and desired a Marisol doll, only two actually owned one, largely because of the high price. Thus, while American Girl was attempting to be
more inclusionary by offering a Latina doll, the price presented issues of accessibility for Latina girls who desired the doll.

Overall, I found that the participants in this study had strong, yet mixed readings of Marisol. In her study of the American Girl and Bratz doll lines, Valdivia (2009) says that racially diverse dolls tend to generate moral panics over loss of whiteness. In this case, Marisol also triggered tensions over class and space and echoed some of the larger struggles over the displacement that the Chicago Latina/o community faces. American Girl stopped selling Marisol after a year, claiming that she had “danced right off our shelves!” (79). She was then replaced by a multiracial doll, Jesse. Although Marisol has disappeared from American Girl’s current doll line, for the majority of the participants she served as an ongoing symbol of the struggle over the politics of representation and contested spaces within the landscape of Chicago.

Conclusion

Until recently, there was little research on Latina/os in Chicago, with notable exceptions like the work of Felix Padilla (1985, 1987). In the last fifteen years, there has been a surge of ethnographic work on Latina/o Chicago with a focus on space, such as De Genova (2005), De Genova and Ramos-Zayas (2003), Fernández (2012a), Pérez (2004), Ramos-Zayas (2003), and Rúa (2012). However, there is still very little scholarship focusing on Latina/o media and Latina/o audiences from Chicago and other parts of the Midwest. At the same time, audience studies generally overlook the role that space and place plays in the reception process. This chapter makes an intervention in these two bodies of scholarship by demonstrating how Latina audiences in Chicago use the city as a lens through which to interpret local, national, and transnational media representations of Latina womanhood.

The city of Chicago and its shifting ethno-landscape was a frame of reference for the participants’ reading of media texts. This indicates that place really does matter in reception. Furthermore, issues of representation, recognition, and citizenship continue to be paramount for underrepresented communities, and this reception study indicates that these issues are also very locally situated. More pressing, this chapter illustrates that Latina audiences struggle over place both symbolically and materially through media. In other words, we cannot divorce what happens in the symbolic space of media and the physical space audiences inhabit—issues of space and citizenship are always inextricably intertwined.