Manufacturing Celebrity: Latino Paparazzi and Women Reporters in Hollywood

by Vanessa Díaz
Duke University Press.
2020. 328 pages.
$107.95 hardcover; $28.95 paper; also available in e-book.

Manufacturing Celebrity: Latino Paparazzi and Women Reporters in Hollywood focuses its critical lens on the evolution of celebrity news and the precarity endured by the media laborers who bring it to audiences around the world. At its core, this book is an interrogation of the unequal power dynamics that situate celebrity media laborers within journalistic and sociocultural hierarchies marked by exploitative conditions and pervasive sexism, racism, and xenophobia. It is an important historical account of the formation and formalization of celebrity media, one that brings much-needed attention to the consequential ways in which celebrities and celebrity media have infiltrated cultural discourses and institutions far beyond the bounds of entertainment.

Coupling personal experience with extensive ethnographic research, author Vanessa Díaz provides readers with firsthand knowledge of the inner workings of celebrity media and demonstrates an acute grasp of the editorial and economic forces that craft American celebrity culture. Accounts from paparazzi, photographers, freelance/staff reporters, bloggers, interns, editors, publicists, and celebrities expand upon Díaz’s experience as a woman of color within these spaces to provide an ambitious assessment of the disposability and disenfranchisement of minoritized celebrity media laborers.
Díaz considers the tensions that emerge from the formal and informal economies in which celebrity “information gatherers” work, interrogating the challenges faced by those differently positioned within the segregated and stratified hierarchies of entertainment media, especially in Hollywood. Hollywood, for Díaz, is a fabrication—an idea that has become a consumable product. It is a universal symbol for celebrity and a manufactured celebrity protagonist itself in narratives of global stardom. She thus re-theorizes Hollywood as the “Hollywood Industrial Complex”: “the political economy made up of the totality of Hollywood’s many subindustries and its laborers . . . [and] celebrity-focused media of all kinds.” Celebrity is not only at the center of this complex; it is “its driving force.”

Each of Manufacturing Celebrity’s three parts offers a rigorous examination of the co-constitutive forces that fuel and are fueled by the demand for 24/7 celebrity news. The major individuals, institutions, and outlets that supply global audiences with non-stop content about celebrities are considered in detail, among them People, Us Weekly, Life & Style, Touch, Entertainment Tonight, E! News, OK!, Star, and TMZ.

Part 1 is dedicated to the paparazzi, its labor, and its laborers. Díaz explores the evolution and the economics of paparazzi work and its relationship to other forms of celebrity photography. She maps how demographic shifts have led to a paparazzi labor force that is 98 percent male, approximately 60 percent of whom are LA-based Latinx men, many (almost half) who may be undocumented. Questions of citizenship and legal status compound the precarious subjectivities of these individuals and their labor, trapped within the interlocking domains of power that constrain agency and opportunity. Many Latino paparazzi view this work as “a form of migrant labor.”

In chapter 1, Díaz details the intricacies of day-to-day paparazzi work and examines the opaque compensation practices that paparazzi navigate in an informal “honor system” with little-to-no oversight, unpacking the hypocrisy of celebrity media that rely on paparazzi images yet want no affiliation with those who capture them. Díaz’s interviews shed light on how Latino paparazzi grapple with their role in elevating and (re)producing the dominant visibility of white celebrities and white celebrity culture in a system that sustains their precarity.

In chapter 2, Díaz situates celebrity news within broader American media ecosystems, detailing the “paparazzi boom” from 2002 to 2008 and the accompanying backlash against it, including the passage of anti-paparazzi laws AB 524 and SB 606 in California. Prior to the backlash, entertainment news was subsumed within “hard news” at key cultural junctures—notably the 9/11 attacks—when audiences were primed for an escape. The financial crisis of 2008 ended this boom, but many of the changes it brought about

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2 Díaz, 15.
3 Díaz, 15.
4 Díaz, 54.
5 Díaz, 79.
have endured. What counts as newsworthy and who determines newsworthiness were fundamentally altered as “gossip” and hard news became blurred, each differently foregrounding celebrities as significant protagonists in America’s popular imaginary and framing celebrity culture as a matter of public concern.

Chapter 3 focuses on Chris Guerro, a paparazzo who died on the job. His tragic death serves as a poignant case study in the book. With Guerro’s mother, Díaz thoughtfully mourns Guerro, examining his death through her theorization of “Media Rituals of Hate.”6 The ritualization of hatred that shapes public perception of paparazzi is central to Díaz’s understanding of how paparazzi are regulated by celebrities, the public, and the media outlets that rely on their labor. As ritual, this performed hatred vilifies paparazzi as predatory and dehumanizes those who perform this work. “The paparazzi’s informal labor and racially minoritized status,” Díaz asserts, “position them as public scapegoats for what is wrong with celebrity media.”7 Díaz outlines how the seemingly un-staged photos characteristic of paparazzi work are often orchestrated with celebrities and their teams. Rituals of hate allow celebrities to maintain hyper-visibility while capitalizing on empathetic narratives that situate them as victims, reductively stereotyping paparazzi work as invasive.

Part 2 is dedicated to the work of celebrity media reporters, a role disproportionately held by white women. Díaz delves into how media laborers navigate ethical dilemmas under pressure from outlets with little formal guidance or oversight. Women reporters are routinely objectified, pressured by editors to leverage their gender and sexuality (often perceived heterosexuality). These unwritten and unregulated ethical considerations—ones that Díaz has both observed and experienced—speak to the precarity of such work. Without guidelines, celebrity media distance themselves from their institutional responsibility to protect the reporters they hire and from potential legal liability for allegations waged against them as a result of the strategies reporters use to obtain the very content they’re pressured to secure.

Díaz dedicates chapter 4 to a critical examination of the red carpet, a central and active element of celebrity manufacturing. The red carpet is both a physical demarcation of space/place and a racialized attribution of value to those who are invited to walk it—an invitation rarely extended to celebrity reporters and photographers, who are instead crammed behind stanchions and organized in pecking orders that make the strata of celebrity media unmistakable. Díaz offers a keen awareness of the red carpet’s ability to transform disparate spaces through the visual and physical lexicon of celebrity culture and its role as a key contributor to the facade and romanticization of celebrity personae.

Chapter 5 expands upon Díaz’s examination of the spaces in which celebrity reporting occurs and considers how race impacts reporter assignments. She details the common practice of stationing reporters outside classrooms; in hospitals, restaurants, nightclubs; and at celebrities’ doorsteps—ordinary sites

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6 Díaz, 119.
7 Díaz, 4.
from which reporters seek to capture the intimate and everyday moments of stars in a calculated effort to reassure audiences that celebrities are just like us. A revealing case is that of Natasha Stoynoff, a longtime People correspondent. In 2016, Stoynoff joined a groundswell of women coming forward with allegations against then-presidential candidate Donald Trump, disclosing that she was assaulted by Trump at his Mar-a-Lago home in 2005 while on assignment. For Díaz, Stoynoff’s assault is emblematic of the vulnerability that women reporters experience, especially given People’s shifting response to the case. If the publication initially showed solidarity with Stoynoff, it eventually provided superficial and laudatory coverage of Trump and his family once he was elected president.

In the third and final part of the book, Díaz investigates celebrity media’s sociocultural consequences, exploring their investment in fostering intimacy between celebrities and fans and maintaining public interest in celebrity as a consumable ideal. In chapter 6, Díaz focuses on body and diet teams, a specific subset of celebrity media dedicated to covering women’s bodies. She considers the ethical dilemmas decision-makers face in their construction and perpetuation of (white, heteronormative) femininity, touting remedies and regimens for achieving the perfect bikini body, reclaiming the body-after-baby, and regaining self-confidence through celebrity weight-gain-then-weight-loss success stories. This coverage reinforces the just like us farce of celebrity while also downplaying how inaccessible such standards are for most women and obfuscating endorsements and brand/media partnerships that compensate celebrities generously for their role embodying such marketable narratives.

In the final chapter, Díaz looks at the practice of coining portmanteaus such as “Brangelina” (the joining of Brad Pitt’s and Angelina Jolie’s names) to identify celebrity couples. She analyzes how this familiar discursive practice lends capital to those privileged in the cultural economy of white heterosexual love. The celebrity merger achieved through this naming affords couples more power as a unified celebrity body than as individual stars; couples become marketable entities and new coffers open and opportunities arise to disseminate their brand.

Manufacturing Celebrity is much more than an analysis of celebrity culture and the media laborers upon whose work it relies. It is a painstaking meditation on how identity, power, and belonging differently privilege media laborers and how the enduring precarity those laborers navigate contributes to the composition of America’s popular imaginary. Indeed, as Díaz argues, “American celebrities are now globally known citizens of an imagined (global) community. They are our common ground, our connection, our community.” At the same time, Díaz clearly dispels the notion that celebrity culture exists in a vacuum outside the concerns of so-called hard news (or vice versa). This book adds important contributions to existing literature about celebrity culture, media labor, and race that would be well placed in conversation with the work of Laura Grindstaff, Elizabeth Bird, Darnell Hunt, Graeme Turner, Nick Couldry, P. David Marshall, Arlene Dávila, and George Lipsitz, among

8 Díaz, 248.
others. It is a model for multi-methodological research and patient, self-reflective ethnography and should be required reading for anyone invested in understanding the dynamic contours of power that inform and control American entertainment media and their relationship to America’s conception and production of itself.

Perry B. Johnson is a postdoctoral fellow at the Center for Media at Risk and the Annenberg Center for Collaborative Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. Her research and practice focus on music, popular culture, and American cultural histories, with an emphasis on archives, public scholarship, power, identity, and belonging.