

Norma Mendoza-Denton. *Homegirls: Language and Cultural Practice among Latina Youth Gangs*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008. 339 pp.

This book is an excellent example of the power of combining long-term ethnographic fieldwork with detailed sociolinguistic analysis. Norma Mendoza-Denton spent two years building relationships with the young Latina women of Sor Juana High School in a neighborhood in Northern California. Most of these girls identified as members of one of the gangs, either Norte or Sur, which have become statewide phenomena in California. Through the tools available to her as a linguistic anthropologist, including discourse analysis, semiotics, and fine-tuned investigation of linguistic variation, the author is able to paint a broad yet detailed picture of the way Latina youth create meaning in their lives.

Mendoza-Denton takes a political approach to her material, which she outlines in the first three chapters. In chapter 1, she explains her aim to address the structures of inequality that Latino youth face in the American public school system. In chapter 2, Mendoza-Denton acknowledges the problematic nature of her own complicated identity. As a Mexican citizen largely educated abroad, she is deceptively dissimilar from the working class Chicanas she studies. Because of this, Mendoza-Denton has struggled with seeming like an “outsider” to her informants, but like an “insider” to some colleagues. The discussion here is important because it may help elucidate for readers the extent of diversity among Latinos.

Homegirls is also meant to challenge traditional social science research on youth gangs (chapter 3). Mendoza-Denton rejects traditional theoretical frameworks that conceptualize gang members as part of an “underclass,” dangerous, pathologized; or, alternatively, emblematic of American independence, nonconformity, and rebellion (77). Instead, she looks for the symbolic practices that allow gang members to construct an identity in resistance to structures of power and in solidarity with particular political causes. Despite this effort, however, the author still refers to the groups she studies as “gangs” with little justification, and risks undermining her own ideological project.

In the next part of the book, Mendoza-Denton examines social practices and cultural phenomena tied to larger issues of linguistic ideology and the semiotics of identity. In chapter 4, Mendoza-Denton demonstrates how the ideological categories of Norte and Sur are not static, but continuously reanalyzed through discourse and practice. Chapters 5 and 6 focus on embodiment and material culture. Especially interesting is Mendoza-Denton’s discussion of “chola aesthetics,” including makeup,

hairstyle, clothing, body type, and even walk. These chola girls, she argues, are actively contradicting and resisting the hegemonic gender paradigm by manipulating its symbolic elements (160).

The last part of the book deals with the micropatterning of language, including metapragmatic awareness, linguistic variation, and the social indexicality of discourse markers. For example, Mendoza-Denton finds that the most powerful members of each group, whether Norte or Sur, are more likely to demonstrate “raising” of the phoneme /I/. These members have more “variation rights” than the others: the right to index a particular non-standard identity because of their status within the group. Thus, the homegirls’ nonstandard linguistic practices, rather than being a form of “inferior” speech, actually serve as status symbols within their community. Although this section of the book largely follows in the footsteps of earlier sociolinguistic variationists, Mendoza-Denton’s approach is novel for its attention to *why* variables shift in certain environments.

Among this book’s strengths is its accessibility to a wide range of audiences. The author’s style is lucid and straightforward, without being oversimplified. Necessary theoretical background is thoroughly covered. *Homegirls* provides a fascinating insight into a rarely studied community, and lends credence and significance to the often undervalued practices of youth. It will be a worthwhile read for all students and scholars of Chicano and Latino studies.

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