

TITLE: Norma Mendoza-Denton's *Homegirls: Language and Cultural Practice among Latina Youth Gangs*

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*Homegirls* is a model of what books about gangs could be—passionate, insightful, rigorous, and engaging—were they not by and large mired in the pathologizing, dehumanizing correctional perspective which dominates the field. Despite reams of policy papers, congressional testimony, and police handbooks on the Norte/Sur dynamic, Mendoza-Denton notes that this is the only academic book on the topic (p. 88), and, “One of the only studies to document in detail aspects of the gang dynamic other than violence, control of territory, or traffic of drugs” (p. 295). As a masterful ethnographer and linguistic anthropologist, Mendoza-Denton explores the social, cultural and linguistic *capital* of gang membership. After reading Mendoza-Denton’s book, one has a better understanding of how young people use the motifs of gangs to strategically situate themselves in a local ecology. It is the most zaftig and rich gang monograph since Thrasher’s (1927): what Thrasher offered in breadth, Mendoza-Denton offers in depth, probing the deeply contextualized semiotics of performing gang identity.

Mendoza-Denton weaves a rich tapestry of the importance of class, ethnicity, gender, gangs and language, not as they limit her informants, but as they are contingently performed into relevance. The young girls she hangs with, like Mendoza-Denton herself, are not entrapped by structural factors as they strategically mold their identities, which are ever changing, never static, but they are not oblivious to such factors either. Rather, they use gangs, just like any other social group as school, for molding identity as a resource to express a deeply felt embodied, socio-economic, historic positioning. One young woman, Güera, is careful not to wear her blue gang clothes of the Sureños when she attends a party with the *Fresas*, who pride themselves as urban middle-class, predominantly European descent elite. Meanwhile some young men, like Junior, are members of the Norteños, until they learn, primarily through innuendo, that their ties to the South and language skills make them much more appropriate candidates for the Sureños. While many Sureños speak English fluently,

they often pretend that they don't, firmly remaining in the same ESL (English as a Second Language) classes year after year in a way that Willis's (1977) lads could certainly appreciate. Yet the Norteños, certainly no ear'oles (Willis, 1979), and every bit as spirited, rebellious and "delinquent" as the Sureños, value English and high achievement in sports and school, even as they maintain ties to "La Nuestra Familia" prison gang. There are also the rich ironies of the upper class exchange student from Tokyo girls who claimed Norte, and the Indian girl who kicked it with Sur. Such analytic insights, with their gentle wit and provocation, reach toward the ineffability found in the best of the social sciences. When she tells the tale of how members of MS-13 (whose "sideburns could not be coaxed") became MS-14 after a series of mishaps at a wedding (switching staunchly from Sur to Norte), I felt the sense of hyperreality one tends to experience in our mediated culture when an account rings especially "true": that I was watching a movie (see Ferrell, Milavanovic and Lyng, 2001).

Mendoza-Denton's account is ideal for undergraduates, as it is as theoretically and methodologically rigorous as it is entertaining. Building from the pioneering work of Brotherton and Barrios (2004), she coins the term *hemispheric localism*, noting,

"Members' concepts of the mission and purpose of the gang as a social organization respond to broader contextual pressures that include members' knowledge of Latino migration dynamics, their own gangs' internationalization, as well as their understandings of worldwide political relations....Young people interpret, animate, take sides in, and make sense of global realities around them through the scope of Norte/Sur gang affiliations" (p. 78).

Mendoza-Denton devotes a chapter to explicating "how youth interpret and stancefully deal with the world around them" (p. 87) through the insights of Junior, a young man who was a Norteño when he arrived from Mexico, because "where I lived there were only Norteños" (p. 127). Yet Junior comes to frame this membership as accidental, and reinterprets his immigrant experience "as being not about the gangs but about the relative location of Mexico and the U.S.," and their corresponding historical and geographic relations of linguistic and

ideological dialectics of power and resistance. She notes that this, “ideological projection from young people’s own condition, and their recognition of its embeddedness in and analogy to wider domains... defines hemispheric localism and serves as a vehicle for the politicization of youth” (78).

The theoretic importance of Mendoza-Denton’s understanding of the performance of gender parallel her insights into the performance of gang identity. Rigorously theorizing cosmetics, she notes, a la Judith Butler, how all of gender is drag, because “we can’t know what’s under the clothes (Surena? Nortena? Piporra? Researcher?)” (p. 154). As in the work of Conquergood (1994a, 1994b, 1997), Garot and Katz (2003), Garot (2007), and the edgework literature in general (see Lyng 1990, 2005,), she emphasizes the *skills* of performing identity. In this case, the bedroom is the hallowed site of imparting and practicing such embodied ways, where one learns to always use darker cover-up (“to block the inference that one wants to be white,” p. 157), *never* look down (p. 156), never diet (p. 158), and especially, when one is fully inhabiting gang identity, wear the eyeliner “all the way out” to the temples. Mendoza-Denton is shocked when, after applying all the proper accoutrements and visiting her local supermarket one evening with the girls, “other shoppers were afraid of me!” (p. 56). Where else in the gang literature might one find such insight into embodiment, into “being there” with such nuanced liveliness? Yet this is only the beginning of the analysis, as she moves on to critique the literature on female gangs as an expression of and predictor of social injury (Moore and Hagedorn, 2001), instead showing convincingly how these young women, who “want no part of the ‘female aesthetic community’” against which so many feminists flail futilely, actually embody gang identity as protection against injurious outcomes.

For cultural criminologists, this book is a model not only for how it sensitively captures youth’s stylistic choices, but also in the ways it grapples with pathologizing

discourses on gangs. Through draconian measures such as the Gang Deterrence and Community Protection Act of 2005 and the Alien Removal Act of 2005, anyone who *even associates* with gang members is at risk of deportation. Through such measures, Latino gang youth are “de-Americanized” (p. 89), even as “government authorities run the risk of completely mischaracterizing the object of their intended description” (p. 90). Placing two descriptions of the same phenomena—Latino youth gangs—side by side, one by an academic researcher and the other by a “expert witness” (the President of the National District Attorneys Association), she asks, “Are these two statements really talking about the same thing?” (p. 90) Teachers never know the difference, “given the official documents that muscle their way to their desks” (p. 92), and hence use dress codes as gang identifiers, even as “any element, even within the confines of a uniform, can be turned into a symbolic marker” (p. 93, cf. Garot and Katz, 2003).

The final three substantive chapters, exploring how the homegirls forge linguistic communities of practice through finely attuned analysis of phonetic shifts, may seem a stretch to incorporate into cultural criminology. As Mendoza-Denton admits, she is Janus-faced, revealing as great a proficiency in capturing the experiential nuances of conversation and behavior through her fieldwork as in her statistical analysis of linguistic data. Yet when she speaks of the heinous social control of “moralistic representations” enforcing “verbal hygiene” (from Cameron, 1995), through hurtful, stereotypical portrayals of “chavs” on British TV as well as “cholas” on American TV, the echoes of Becker (1963) and Matza (1969), not to mention Hall and Jefferson (2006 [1975]), are loud and clear.

One of the great strengths of Mendoza-Denton’s analysis is her fearlessness—not the fearlessness required to contact and befriend gang members (she would surely laugh at the suggestion)—but the fearlessness to explore in detail those moments of tension or embarrassment when her research did not go quite according to plan, as well as those

negative cases which contradict her analytic points. For instance, as the Norteña girls flirt with a hapless white boy whom they had picked up in the rain, Mendoza-Denton experiences a “deep malaise” both at how the boy reacted, and at her own scolding of the girls, telling them, “you shouldn’t do stuff like that,” which might, “create or confirm a stereotype in his mind of sexualized Latinas” (pp. 72-73). When Mendoza-Denton meets Manuel, a highly tattooed ex-prisoner at a laundrymat, she is mortified when she unknowingly introduces herself with the wrong phonology, pronouncing her first name with a Spanish accent which is anathema to Manuel’s deep understanding of Norteño ways. She then follows by clumsily asking what his tattoos mean, eliciting only his scorn, and earning herself a quick exit from the interaction. By not hiding or rationalizing such gaffs, which are par for the course for any ethnographer, she builds the reader’s confidence rather than undermining it. Similarly, in her linguistic analysis, her strengths arise from the analysis of negative cases. For instance, when Sadgirl, one of the “downest” of the Sureños, evinces one of the least linguistically marked patterns of speaking like a girl in the gang, Mendoza-Denton probes Sadgirl’s religious upbringing and devotion, showing how she is recognized as a leader without having to tense and raise the sound /I/. As she states, “It is crucial for sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists to talk about moments in one’s fieldwork where misunderstandings produce important insights” (p. 114). The vitality of such insights for students of crime, media and culture should be poignantly clear; aside from Jack Katz (1988, 1999, 2001), disappointingly few criminologists self-consciously maintain the traditions of analytic induction (Cressey, 1953; Lindesmith, 1968).

Mendoza-Denton also sensitively depicts the balancing act of simultaneously studying rival social groups, as she must carry two wallets, with entirely different sets of pictures divided by Norte and Sur; she fears being caught by one gang as she hangs out with the rival, and occasionally receives “mad-dog” stares from informants of one group as she interviews

those from another. At times, her allegiances are all too evident, in her obvious admiration for the Norte T-Rex, or her dismissive statement about jocks, who she acknowledges as among the most “popular” girls at school: “Faced with little validation from their ethnic/cultural peers, it was no surprise that Latina Jocks turned to institutional sources of approval” (p. 30). One wonders whether the “contempt” in which recent immigrants held the jocks might also be tinged with envy, which may have also found its way into Mendoza-Denton’s narrative. Still, no analysis can address every nuance, satisfy every reader’s curiosity, and Mendoza-Denton goes much further than most.

*Homegirls* is truly a breath of fresh air in the gang literature and criminology in general. Through it, Mendoza-Denton makes good on her hope to “lend a new dimension to studies of youth styles, showing them to be innovative not only in terms of dress, music and appearance, but also as crucially participating in processes of language variation and change” (p. 295). By focusing on communities of practice, she avoids such tired and unproductive questions as why young people join gangs, how they leave gangs, or the community factors which may precipitate or ameliorate the presence of gangs. Mendoza-Denton thus sidesteps the reification of vocabularies of motive which all too often serve as the main course in gang studies and criminology in general. Instead, she serves the reader a feast of the richness of Latina young gang culture, celebrating its vibrant possibilities for transcending the limitations by which California strives to thwart and constrict both indigenous Chicanos and more recent arrivals. Future gang studies which ignore this fine contribution will be impoverished indeed.

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