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## Review of *Homegirls: Language and Cultural Practice among Latina Youth Gangs*

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**Comments**

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*Homegirls: Language and Cultural Practice among Latina Youth Gangs.*  
By Norma Mendoza-Denton. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2008. Pp.  
ix+339. \$35.00 (paper).

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Among the youngest and fastest-growing ethnic groups in the United States, Latinos have persisted as one of the nation's most educationally disadvantaged and economically disenfranchised constituencies. And while there is a growing awareness of the importance of the Latino population in terms of the political power that Latino groups could potentially muster in the major metropolitan areas of the country, there nevertheless exists a dearth of investigations aimed at analyzing the lives of Latino youths that are successful at challenging very static, monolithic, and essentialized notions of culture and identity. So far the historical record has amply revealed very undialectical descriptions of Latino culture, especially the gang culture that persists as a dominant theme in the mainstream media and entertainment industry where Latinos are frequently pantomimed, demonized, romanticized, and criminalized, positioned as the Anglosphere's exotic others, and judged against the Eurocentric norms of a market-centered, instrumental society. The challenge of contemporary ethnographic research is to guard against approaches where a positivist-empiricist valorization of lived experience supervenes in such a way as to reinscribe the dominance of signifying practices over material social relations, often preempting the space of capital or driving a critique of political economy underground and out of sight.

*Homegirls*, an experimental sociolinguistic ethnography of subaltern others, spans a decade of research by a woman who is keen to examine her position as an outsider/insider in the research process and the identity formation of her participants: female gang members. As Norma Mendoza-Denton stipulates, gangs, and female gang members specifically, are often the subjects of social inquiry as researchers, policy makers, and the like attempt to generate measures for handling youths classified as socially subversive. Unlike traditional forays into the social patterns of these polarized youths, Mendoza-Denton provides an intimate and personal look into the formation of these young women, who are most frequently likened to violent, drug-shamed, and unfeminine untouchables in the broader social order. In what proves to be a complex, deep, and intellectually challenging inquiry into the discursive practices that serve as indices of the women's social membership and interaction, this text weaves notions of transnationalism, machismo, memory, and communities of practice to produce a situated analysis of the linkages between microlevel linguistic variation and the macrolevel group politic. The end result is as fluid and complex as the participants themselves; no single aspect of the study can be read as an isolated component of how the young women relate to

society or the discursive choices they make to signal an allegiance to their “homegirls.”

Mendoza-Denton chronicles her journey of becoming a tutor, friend, and confidant of a select group of young women from Sor Juana High School in northern California. Having been in her early twenties when she began the research, Mendoza-Denton writes of the difficulties that she encountered as a woman with a shared—albeit partially—heritage with youths who were either recent migrants or U.S. nationals generations apart from the indigenous land of Tenochtitlán. A “halfie among halfies,” Mendoza-Denton was able to use her English and Spanish proficiency to code-switch among participants, and her frame and self-described dark skin signaled a level of shared otherness to observers. She quickly learned, however, that *how* she spoke and cloaked her frame would signal a location on the sociopolitical map between Norteña and Sureña (Northern and Southern) gang affiliates. Her focus on participants’ daily interactions and the effects of their verbal expression offers a bird’s-eye view of the minutia and intricate display of symbolic coding (makeup, hair, and iron-pleated Dickies pants included) that attests to people’s membership in a social group.

Membership in this case runs deep into the subconscious, complicating our understanding of identity not as a simple belief, cultural practice, or repression of the “big other,” but as a lived, gendered, affective, vocal, physical, and fluid relationship to individual geographies of space and memories of place. Mendoza-Denton makes sense of the Norteñas’ and Sureñas’ discursive practices and invokes “hemispheric localism” as a way to situate the lineage of struggles her participants encountered to maintain a cohesive cultural identity in the midst of physical displacement from their “homelands” and cultural displacement from dominant society. Language is thus denaturalized, and the interdependence of social contexts that partially determine an individual’s mode of expression is unveiled.

*Homegirls* reads as part narrative, part testimony, and, toward the end, as a phonological handbook that can leave the reader feeling challenged by quantitative linguistic analyses. Chapters 7–9 pay particularly close attention to the notion of “vocalic repertoire,” signaling the “higher-level symbolic organization” (p. 209) of the young women’s lives. The more “technical” aspects of *Homegirls* build upon the Labovian tradition of identifying the relationship between the micropatterning of language and other markers of social identity and provide a space for Mendoza-Denton to situate her work in the general “science” of linguistics. Even in the face of an overworked phonological analysis, the reader is not left with the impression that the specificity of the young women’s lives has been lost in transcription. On the contrary, Mendoza-Denton diligently takes the reader back to the context that shapes the young women’s speech patterns; she never loses sight of how language as speech is embodied and how the science of language ultimately speaks to the meaning social actors ascribe to their lives.

Mendoza-Denton proves to be a skillful interpreter of the speech patterns and ideologies that characterize the Norteñas and Sureñas. There is a point, though, when we are left to ask ourselves what to make of this intricate, sociolinguistic ethnography. Mendoza-Denton does not break away from the knowledge she seeks to comprehend, and that is both a virtue and vice in *Homegirls*. Some loose associations are made between the discourse of machismo, for example, and the ways in which the women resist traditional patriarchal patterns of association in the nuclear family. But left unexamined are the knottier aspects that shape the women's life choices, and a critical look at the seemingly natural unity between language and being/becoming is missing. To what extent does speech determine our lives? Is speech our own private synecdoche? What are the economic, political, and social relations that override our intentional speech patterns? These are some of the residual questions that develop from the text, and we are left to question whether the anthropologist can ever calmly nest in the thicket of scientific "rigor" in her research project. "Science," in the case of *Homegirls*, demonstrates a particular allegiance to postmodern and post-structural theoretical frameworks in the social science literature. This cautions us to consider the hierarchical relationships between theory, practice, and analysis in any kind of ethnographic undertaking. And yet, there is much to applaud in this innovative ethnographic study.

Mendoza-Denton has broken new ground, and she has much to say about her entanglement as a "native, near-native, other anthropologist" and the complexity of speech that underlies our interactions and being/becoming in the world. But to understand the more determinate ways in which alienated groups are forced to make certain choices over others, and the possibilities available to them in their struggle for a better future, we have to look for studies that pay greater attention to capitalism as a social relation that manifests itself thorough our linguistic engagements and our subjective choices or lack of them. Especially given the current systemic crisis of capitalism and the resurgent tide of racially motivated attacks on Latino migrants, we need a dialectical approach that better syncopates structural mediation and conjunctural possibilities and opportunities. That caveat aside, we recommend *Homegirls* as an innovative and impressive work of scholarship and a welcome addition to our understanding of youth culture and gang membership.