

SO! Reads: Norma Mendoza-Denton's Homegirls

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Abstract

Makeup has long been an intentional part of a chola aesthetic: in particular, the skillful sign of bold black eyeliner or a carefully arched, thin, brow.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Chican@/Latin@ Studies, Cultural Studies, Identity, Language, SO! Reads



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“When I wear my eyeliner, me siento más macha (I feel more macha) I’m ready to fight” (54)



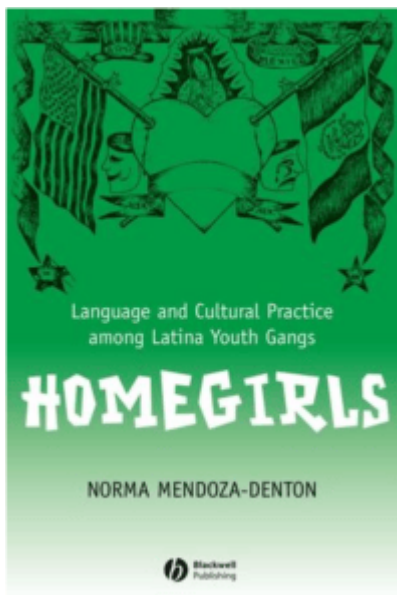
Makeup has long been an intentional part of a chola aesthetic: in particular, the skillful sign of bold black eyeliner or a carefully arched, thin, brow. The quote above by Norteña Xóitchil, one of author Norma Mendoza-Denton’s interviewees, reminds us that make-up not only creates a sense of empowerment but also evokes the idea of physical strength (“feeling macha”). Norma Mendoza-Denton’s ethnographic study *Homegirls: Language and Cultural Practice among Latina Youth Gangs* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2008) presents a project of high ambition, and even higher execution, in its carefully crafted discussion of the linguistic and cultural practices of Latina youth gangs at Sor Juana High School in northern California. *Homegirls* offers much needed insight into the relationship between language style and the cultural, lived experiences of Latina youth gangs. She centers her analysis on the linguistic, the cultural, and the phonetic, and in this way she pushes students of ethnic studies and sound studies to consider how young Latinas craft and articulate their own identity through meaning-making practices that challenge tropes of deviancy that are often unfairly cast on young women of color.

Throughout the book, speaking chola – an urban, gendered variation of Chicana English – becomes an audible badge, a marker of experience rather than a punch line, a culturally appropriated costume, a music video fad, or linguistic variety in need of policing. Recently, celebrity white or non-Latina women, such as Gwen Stefani and Lana Del Rey, have adopted telltale signs of a chola aesthetic – the crisp centered hair part, baggy pants, big hoops and/or only-the-top-buttoned plaid shirt. By focusing on the language styles of cholas, Mendoza-Denton encourages readers to think beyond the stereotypical images and sounds that so often circulate in mainstream media about cholas. *Homegirls* offers Sound Studies and Chicana/o Studies scholars a notable addition to the growing literature on the intersections of language, race, and sound.



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"You gotta take pride to do your clothes
you know I have to iron,
when I go out I have to iron my shirt for half an hour
or forty-five minutes, you know,
my pants, you know
they gotta be
cre::ased
you know they gotta-" (56)



Homegirls joins conversations on Latinas and gang culture (Fregoso 2003; Miranda 2003; Ramírez 2009), which have historically been male-centered. Thelma, one of the Norteña girls, demonstrates in the quotation above her engagement with an [aesthetic practice](#) often linked with Latino gang members. Although the topic of language and linguistic identities, specifically bilingualism and translating, are emerging topics within Chicana/o Studies, Mendoza-Denton's work joins that of a small number of scholars who take on Latina/o language practices and identities as the central focus of their work. She observes, in fact, how identity and meaning-making processes are intertwined to language, as are other social markers of identity such as race, class, gender, ethnicity, and accent. *Homegirls* joins recent discussions that demonstrate specifically how accents are vocal stand-ins for a person's [racialized](#), [classed](#), and gendered experience. Where Fregoso and Miranda center their discussion on the cinematic representations of cholas and a historical account of pachucas respectively, Mendoza-Denton's work is more in line with Miranda's ethnographic approach to Latina youth gangs. *Homegirls* listens to the women's voices and allows them to speak for themselves. This approach yields a work that reminds us how language identities are racialized when conflated with other racial markers, how they negotiate power relations (in/out group dynamics), and how they can also function as political forms of resistance.

"My dad dice que me miro como lesbian (says I look like a lesbian), my mom dice que qué guangajona (complains that it's baggy). How much you wanna bet that I can go outside like this y no me dicen nada (they won't say anything)" (151)

Maureen, a 14-year-old participant, speaks above to the code switching that many of the young women in this study practice. Mendoza-Denton re-imagines the chola as an innovator, highlighting the role of language and the body in creating new cultural practices. For example, in Chapter 5, the author heralds an exciting discussion on play and applying makeup as forms of gendered performances expanding on notions of beauty and grooming amongst Latina youth. She writes, "The symbolic and unconventional use of makeup among the girls claiming Norte and Sur at Sor Juana High School literally painted gender and ethnicity on their bodies," marking a critical intervention in how the chola aesthetic racializes and genders bodies, yet also functions as a self-directed performance (152). In paying close attention to the symbolic meaning of makeup and its application, the ritual of carefully drawing the brow dismantles the mainstream appropriation of this often-criminalized look.

Mendoza-Denton's close phonetic analysis demonstrates how the visual aesthetic coupled with a sonic aesthetic speaks to the political implications of embodied linguistic and cultural practices. The chola vocal aesthetic challenges traditional notions of femininity, closely associated with politics of respectability through Spanish honorifics like "usted," within the Chicano family. This idea echoes other studies that show how [pachucas](#), precursors to contemporary homegirls, with their extravagant attire and deviant behavior embody an adolescent rebellion against the patriarchal Chicano family and how [pachuquismos](#) forged a stylized linguistic resistance. Such stylized linguistic and embodied resistance can be seen in the excerpt below from T-Rex, one of Mendoza-Denton's most candid participants in her study.

T-Rex: *A girl could be more macha than some guys. For example me.*
Norma: *You think you're more macha than guys?*
T-Rex: *I **am** more macha.*
Norma: *What makes you macha?*
T-Rex: *The way I act. The way I don't let them step on me. (164)*

In this brief excerpt, T-Rex articulates her notions of being 'macha,' a prime example of a discursive and material Latina youth practice that transcends the boundaries of normative gendered expressions for Latina youth. We are accustomed to seeing urban cholas with curiosity, envy, or both. Mendoza-Denton allows us to hear them and gain a deeper understanding of their social practices.



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In framing the chola aesthetic as a transgressive type of beauty, Mendoza-Denton poses that the cholas in this study act as cultural producers who assign alternative meanings to femininity through their body and speech. Recalling Xóchitl's remarks about mascara, the eyeliner serves in one form as a tool for a racialized feminine ideal of beauty, while simultaneously a sign for "willingness to fight" for other girls (154). Eyeliner, in this example, very visibly displays the complex interactions and negotiations of gender norms and agency. In this sense, Mendoza-Denton grants the reader a primary example of how cholas participate in a type of feminine gender expression that challenges expected ways of acting, which includes speech.

From Mendoza-Denton's conversation with T-Rex, we see that speech and accent are just as meaningful in the construction of this alternative aesthetic. T-Rex, explains how the eyeliner is a "power-based interpretation" that when correlated with a tough, or even threatening, manner of walking—the use of the body—cholas command power and respect. Here, her intervention serves not only to gain a deeper understanding of Latina youth practices but also frames the chola as an empowered, vocal (what some would consider, mouthy) woman. Too often cholas receive harsh criticism or complete disregard for their assumed subversive behavior, criminality, and social deviance. In *Homegirls*, Mendoza-Denton challenges those notions by finding the symbolic capital in how these young women employ discursive, material, and phonetic practices.

The final two chapters of the book focus on the specific linguistic features relevant to studies of language and sound. Mendoza-Denton highlights phonetic variation among the girls speech in how their realization of /I/ demarcates core speakers from members of the group in the periphery yet points to similar speaking characteristics for girls of both gangs. The author's focus on the stigmatized Th-Pro set (i.e. something, nothing) in the speech of Latina girls demonstrates how it discursively positions these young women's interactions and group affiliation due to its frequency and saliency. These later chapters demonstrate one of the author's most significant

contributions: projecting a specific accent is often linked to the creation of an identity. As Mendoza-Denton writes, “How speakers pronounce their words says a lot not only about the identities that they wish to project, but also about the history of the language(s) that they speak” (231). These linguistic variations give readers insight on the importance of how distinctive discourse markers are vital in the creation of stylized identities for young women of color.

Norma Mendoza-Denton has produced a rich account of a community largely ignored and misinterpreted in the conversations on Latina youth culture in the United States. As she reminds readers in her conclusion, *Homegirls* is one of the only studies of its kind that documents gang dynamics outside of discussions regarding violence, control over territory, or drug trafficking. While this approach provides a much-needed focus on the self-making and cultural processes amongst youth of color, I wonder if some significant discussions might be left out with this approach. Although there is large need for research on this topic that deviates from traditional approaches (such as criminality, violence, drug trafficking) when working with youth, particularly women of color, in her effort to subvert these sociological mainstays Mendoza-Denton avoids certain experiences that leave out pertinent context.



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For example, in her discussion of the young women's makeup practices, Mendoza Denton mentions the perceived threat they pose to teachers and police at school but does not go into more detail. These questions are not to discount the contributions of the book but rather to introduce future considerations for work surrounding Latina youth gangs. However, for Mendoza-Denton, the focus on the creativity and agency these young women embody is never lacking:

*“So when you walk down the street,
you got the special walk, [begins to walk deliberately, swinging her upper body]*

*you walk like this,
you walk all slow,
just checking it out.
I look like a dude, ¿que no?
I walk, and then I stop.
I go like this [tilts head back – this is called looking “in”]
I always look in, I always look in,
I never look down.
It’s all about power
You never fucking smile.
Fucking never smile” (155-6)*



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Homegirls is at its finest when the reader is presented with excerpts like the quote above where T-Rex's assertive physical and mental stance illustrates the linguistic and cultural practices that Mendoza-Denton seeks to highlight in her work. Mendoza-Denton's contribution to this topic privileges the symbolic capital in linguistic, embodied, and cultural practices which sets up a platform for future work on Latina identities. When we read cholas in popular culture we might think of the aesthetic, the stereotypes, the big hoops, the dark lips, and the mascara. When we read *Homegirls*, Norma Mendoza-Denton compels us to consider the complex web of how linguistic and cultural practices (through material and vocal embodiments) speaks to the intersections of race, gender, and class amongst Latina youth gangs.

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Featured image is of Yasmin Ferrada (the author's sister) as photographed by King Kast. It is used with permission by the author.

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