

¿QUÉ ONDA?

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¿Qué Onda? *Urban Youth Culture and Border Identity*. By Cynthia L. Bejarano. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2005. 248 pages. \$21.95 (paper).

¿Qué Onda? *Urban Youth Culture and Border Identity* treads the familiar ground of youth cultures in the Southwest—in an urban high school that the author calls Altamira High—where the shifting demographics of the formerly privileged and mostly white school have forced the administration and students alike to deal with a changing situation. What seems homogeneous to outsiders—that is, “Hispanics”—is anything but to the students within this group. Cynthia Bejarano employs ethnographic methodologies to explore the tensions among Latina/os at the border. She argues for taking into account the border experience as both a material reality and a symbolic set of circumstances that position youth in a very difficult situation that fosters divisions and hostilities rather than unity and solidarity. It is a sad tale that reminds me of *Con Respeto* (Valdés 1996), another elegant ethnography of education at the border that discusses Mexican parental involvement in their children’s education, which is almost completely at odds with hegemonic expectations of both parental involvement and student participation.

From the outset, Bejarano acquaints us with the two dominant groups within Latinidad at this particular high school: the Mexicana/os and the Chicana/os. The former are mostly recent immigrants whose language and class binds them together. The latter are often, though not always, second-generation or later Mexican Americans whose facility with English and mostly legal status

puts them at a superior position in relation to newly arrived and often quasi-legal Mexicana/os. As Gloria Anzaldúa has written—and indeed, Bejarano makes extensive use of her work—the struggle to belong and to gain a foothold north of the border via citizenship pits recent and older immigrants against each other. The Latina/o youth groups create and assert their identity in relation to prevailing discourses of power that discriminate against the immigrant and privilege the Anglos.

Bejarano invests four years in Altamira High School getting to know Mexicana/os and Chicana/os. She makes a methodological decision to focus on girls for a number of reasons. First, Bejarano appeared young enough to be asked out on dates by the young men in the groups she studied. Clearly that was a problem. Second, the girls were more open to discussion than the boys. Third, the girls appeared to mistrust her reasons for talking to boys, and thus talking only to the girls aided her study. Bejarano found that Mexican girls were more open than the Chicanas, partly because the latter had more experience mistrusting school authorities and their motives. Fortunately for us, Bejarano had a four-year period to sort out these issues, and her efforts have yielded a rich text that is bound to energize border, Latina/o, and youth studies.

Bejarano asserts that the main fault line of difference remains language as Mexicana/os and Chicana/os mutually police each other. Chicana/os who speak Spanish feel shame that they cannot properly write it or even speak it. Mexicans are there to point out their deficiencies in a language in which they have not been schooled. Some Chicanos speak no Spanish, and both their families and fellow students ridicule them for it, using terms such as *Whitsicans* and *Chicanquis*. Many Chicanos, despite their English proficiency, retain an accent, which sets them apart from non-Chicana/o, native English

speakers. In turn, even when they speak and understand Spanish, most Chicanas/os do not go out of their way to help, or they outright reject, Spanish-speaking Mexican immigrants. Mexicans, on the other hand, can speak only to each other, most freely in ESL classes or during lunch hour in their socially segregated spaces. The fact that they do not speak English means they do not have access to most school activities and resources, as these are conducted or circulated mostly in English by English-speaking faculty and students. Thus, there is a hierarchy according to language, with Anglo English speakers at the top, Chicana/os in the middle, and Mexicana/os at the bottom.

Piggybacking onto language and belonging as major vectors of difference, Latina/o youth develop a "style" that further exacerbates divisions between Mexicana/os and Chicana/os. In addition to enduring parentally reinforced gender regulations, most Mexicanas also hold on to all that is Mexican, as that is what grounds them and links them to each other. In this process, the wide diversity within Mexicanidad fades into the background in favor of a homogenous national identity that may or may not represent the young Mexicanas' experiences in Mexico. Chicanas, on the other hand, whether through hairstyle, media and musical choices, clothing, or body piercings and tattoos, make more choices that tend to be coded as Anglicized even though, ironically enough, many of the Mexican youth came from far more cosmopolitan areas, such as Mexico City, where such practices may have been more generalized. Bejarano insightfully notes that despite their subordinate position, Mexicanas are more grounded in their identity than the ambivalent and hybrid Chicanas. It seems that both cultures are far more comfortable with pure and unitary approaches to identity than with creative mixtures of cultures.

As a result of all these differences, there are deep divisions and hostilities between these two groups. Mexicanas often express bafflement at the Chicanas' attitude toward them given that Chicanas' parents endured precisely the same vilification now being heaped upon Mexicanas by fellow Chicana students. Some of the girls from both groups also acknowledge that they are all discriminated against as a homogeneous Latina/o threat in dominant Anglo culture. School officials are largely ignorant of these intragroup dynamics, assigning Latina/o faculty and staff to deal with any issues that may arise, and thus continuing to treat systemic structural issues of inequalities as purely "Latina/o issues." Even the establishment of a MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán) after-school chapter, intended to bridge the gap between these two groups, served to reinforce the division further, as English-speaking Chicana/os use the association as yet another location to assert their superiority over the Spanish-speaking Mexicans.

Bejarano's study documents the need to understand the heterogeneity within Latinidad. School officials must further understand the tensions that their dismissive and homogenizing practices are causing among youth. Teachers and counselors must take into account the extreme stress endured by Mexican youth whose citizenship status may be questioned at any time. The creative ways that youth hybridize need to be valorized. The ways that schools continue to track youth into ethnic- and class-specific educational paths has to be checked. This is a matter of social justice for which we have extensive research dating back decades (see, for example, Foley 1990). Thus, there are plenty of applications for educators to be gleaned from this book.

The book's drawback is its constant, indeed almost self-defeating, insistence on literature review. This leads to repetition and interferes with the flow. One wishes that the author had limited her review to the first two chapters and

had allowed for the youth voices to come out more. After all, four years of ethnographic work must have generated massive amounts of interviews and field notes. I feel we barely get a glimpse of these elements. Also, there is too much self-reflexivity regarding the “native ethnographer.” The fact is, as *fronteriza* as the author might be, she is an academic ethnographer whose work will both contribute to a much-needed literature and help her career. Given that the book seeks to reach out to a broader constituency than reflexive ethnographers, the frequent self-reflexive passages are a stumbling block in terms of flow and readability. These two issues, however, are not significant enough to prevent us from reading an excellent ethnography about Mexicana and Chicana youth at the border. The nuanced results of Bejarano’s work should inform scholars and practitioners across a broad range of disciplines and professions. I have already begun to incorporate chapters into my undergraduate classes and to assign the entire book in doctoral seminars on identity, gender, and Latina/o studies. I encourage readers to do the same.

Works Cited

- Foley, D. E. 1990. *Learning Capitalist Culture: Deep in the Heart of Texas*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Valdés, G. 1996. *Con Respeto: Bridging the Distances between Culturally Diverse Families and Schools: An Ethnographic Portrait*. New York: Teacher’s College Press.