

HOMEGIRLS

Karma R. Chávez

Homegirls in the Public Sphere. By Marie “Keta” Miranda. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003. 211 pages. \$19.95 (paper).

This unique ethnography of Chicanas in gangs is an important contribution to Chicana/Latina studies. Miranda focuses on members of the Norteñas With Attitude (NWA) Chicana gang alliance whom she met at NEL Centro de Juventud, a youth community center in Fruitvale, California. Her original intent was to study audience reception by asking girls in gangs to respond to movies that depict gang activity. The girls were not interested. Because of Miranda’s talents as a researcher, fueled by her commitment to understanding power relations and to giving participants an active role in research, she shifted her project focus to “a study of girls in gangs speaking on behalf of themselves” (3). Still, she carefully maneuvers the various and complex layers that inform the issues of representation that charge this study—in the ways the girls represent themselves to her, to each other, and to the public, as well as in the ways she writes the “ethnographer’s tale” (21). Because girls in gangs are typically not allowed voice in public spheres, and because they are also pigeonholed into existing only within certain zones or “turfs,” Miranda follows Nancy Fraser’s notion of counter public spheres, noting, “I follow them out of the conventional ‘turf’ to examine their discursive practices as the tactics of the oppressed in counter or subaltern public spheres” (4). She thus engages in an extensive look at the political, economic, and social milieu of the girls’ home, Fruitvale.

As detailed in the opening chapters, Miranda started her research by using discussion group and survey methods to elicit responses about the girls' perceptions of gang movies. She also prepared interview questions, but in working closely with a peer counselor named Maria, who functioned as a gatekeeper, Miranda realized that her study was not going to meet the needs of the girls. As she adapted to the girls' desire to talk about their own lives, her methods also changed to semistructured interviews and group discussions (34). She focused on providing representations of Chicana girls in gangs that differed from portraits painted by traditional gang studies. She also wanted to engage in conversations with attention to equality. Thus, her participants became co-participants, and Miranda came to rely on an alliance model, which "is an interactive model that allows people to come to terms with the implications of power and privilege" (48).

Miranda spends the last four chapters of the book describing the activities in which she and the girls engaged, for example, attending town meetings and creating a short documentary that revealed how the girls negotiate identity and social concerns such as gender, sexuality, friendship, and nationalism in both public and private spheres. She provides three case studies that reveal the girls' interactions with the public sphere in three "off-turf" contexts, and she finally engages in theoretical and practical analysis and interpretation. A final section of the book addresses frequently asked questions, or FAQs.

Miranda's text is important because of her commitment to negotiating the power and representational differentials always evident in ethnographic inquiry. She keeps her voice present in the text, revealing when she took authority, when the girls took authority, or when she was unable to provide an "accurate" representation of certain activities or explanations. Moreover, Miranda provides important insights for the construction of public spheres and

the implications that race, class, and gender have on these constructions. For example, in one of the case studies, Miranda and the girls went to a local clinic to talk with the staff about teen pregnancy and gangs. The girls tried to take this as an opportunity to influence the traditional public sphere and the way they were regarded within it. However, this encounter was frustrating because the girls were not allowed to fully participate in this dialogue; they were not heard. In this instance, Miranda argues that the clinic staff members were more concerned with issues of race and ethnicity than with the girls' concerns that come from gender. The girls' attempts to construct a counter public space, in this case, failed. The question for those conducting studies about public and counter public spheres is: "Are we listening, and how can we listen better?" (144). This question offers political and policy-based implications for those who study counter public spheres within and outside Chicana communities. These issues also have important implications for ethnographic studies.

While Miranda offers important insights about the negotiations Chicana gang members make regarding their identity and their roles in public and private discursive spheres, there are one or two weaknesses in the text. For one, although Miranda remains committed to allowing the girls to speak for themselves, she relies far more on her descriptions of events than she does on what the girls actually said. Some sections of the book include very few, if any, of the girls' words (demonstrating the challenge of co-participatory research). Additionally, while Miranda explains that her methodology is influenced largely by Chela Sandoval's conceptualization of a "methodology of the oppressed" (107), she does little to explicate the nuances of this methodology. Importantly, the message and aim of the work do not seem to be directly affected by this error.

One finishes the text with a clear understanding of the relationships that Miranda created with her co-participants, the complexities of negotiating identity factors for Chicana girls in gangs, and the challenges posed for counter public sphere theory. For these reasons, the text is an important critical work for ethnographers who wrestle with matters of power and representation, as well as those in Chicana/o, feminist, and women's studies who care about the well-being of inner-city Chicanas.