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InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies

Title

Review: ¿Qué Onda? Urban Youth Cultures and Border Identity by Cynthia L. Bejarano

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0t33n4fq>

Journal

InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies, 4(1)

ISSN

1548-3320

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Publication Date

2008-02-08

DOI

10.5070/D441000610

Peer reviewed

¿Qué Onda? Urban Youth Cultures and Border Identity by Cynthia L. Bejarano. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2005. 248 pp. ISBN 0-816-52297-9.

Latinos are often times viewed as one ethnicity without looking into the differences and similarities that exist among them. Nationality and culture, for example, are often characteristics of existing diversity. Another characteristic is generation status, which must be taken into consideration to better understand the differences and similarities that a group of people share and to see how this affects their identity construction. Mexicana/o and Chicana/o¹ youth, for example, share many characteristics, but the identity of these two groups varies depending on generation status, culture, language, citizenship, and geography (Anzaldúa, 1999).

In *¿Qué Onda? Urban Youth Cultures and Border Identity*, Cynthia L. Bejarano critically examines the identity construction of Mexicana/o and Chicana/o youth in a metropolitan Southwestern high school over the course of four years to demonstrate that identity is formed through historical events, immigration status, proximity to the Mexican border, language, culture, generation status, gender, and popular culture. The book's opening chapter provides an examination of geopolitics and history to show that one factor influencing Mexicana/o and Chicana/o identity construction is the past, present, and future discrimination they have encountered in U.S. society. This historical perspective allows the reader to better understand issues such as the location in which one lives, especially when dealing with matters of youth culture and social stratification that form hierarchies within the school setting.

Bejarano argues that immigrant youth and native minorities' experiences in the United States vary depending on their proximity to the Mexican border, regardless of whether they live in a city or suburb, and that assimilation is determined by the degree of contact that youth have with American culture. This chapter is important because it demonstrates how the assimilation process differs depending on the stigmas and stereotypes of Mexicanas/os, Chicanas/os, and/or Cubanas/os. The social capital of a group of people ultimately determines whether the group assimilates easily or resists assimilation for example, the history and politics of countries vary and therefore the lives of people are different from one another. Using Border Theory allows scholars to value each aspect of the lives of Mexicanas/os and Chicanas/os and allows them to be viewed non-hegemonically. Border Theory is interdisciplinary in its examination of language, sociology, geopolitics, history, media portrayal, and other aspects of identity formation. The identity construction of Mexicana/o and Chicana/o youth is affected by everything that surrounds them, from the history of their country of origin to Hip-Hop to legal status. An important characteristic of Border Theory is that it removes itself

from the usual black/white dichotomy and allows room for much more to be examined to understand identity construction in Mexicana/o and Chicana/o youth.

Internal colonialism is another problem that Mexicanas/os and Chicanas/os face in identity construction. These groups carry with them the stereotypes assigned to them simply for being People of Color.² For example, their language is constantly under attack. Mexicanas/os are taught English in an academic way distinct from the type of English spoken by Chicanas/os, thus setting them apart. For Chicanas/os, English and Spanish are often combined into Spanglish, while Mexicana/os often keep the two languages separate. Language differences thus set Mexicanas/os and Chicanas/os apart, creating borders within their common ethnicity, causing frequent conflicts with each other, and creating social hierarchies within school settings. For Mexicanas/os, learning English is often a painful process since educators frequently prohibit students from speaking Spanish in the classroom; this prohibition in turn creates a racist experience for Mexicanas/os and a sense of shame for not being able to speak proper English and not being allowed to speak their native language. Bejarano also explains how youth create their own in-groups as a response; such groups are formed by generational status and distinguish themselves by citizenship, style, language, and music, among other things.

Bejarano's work on Mexicana/o Chicana/o youth and border identity contributes to educators' and scholars' understanding of history and its importance to the identity construction of Mexicana/o Chicana/o youth. This study provides an in-depth examination of the effects of language and popular culture on youth to show that Mexicana/o and Chicana/o youth are influenced by different issues based on their experiences, and therefore are distinct from each other. For example, Chicanas/os' use of Spanglish and Hip-Hop sets them apart from Mexicanas/os because of the degree to which they are each influenced by American popular culture. Educators will especially benefit from Bejarano's work because it provides a look at the diversity that exists between those who migrate to the United States and those who are born here. Bejarano argues that this diversity in turn allows the reader understand that there are major differences and experiences among people depending on historical events, immigration status, proximity to the Mexican border, language, culture, generation status, gender, and popular culture. She supports her argument with evidence from literature and primary data to show that identity formation among youth is created by these factors.

A major part of the study focuses on the grouping of students into social hierarchies based on factors such as their "legal" status and the means by which Chicanas/os "otherize" Mexicanas/os and perpetuate colonialism. Perhaps Bejarano could have further analyzed issues regarding colonized peoples, in order to provide an understanding as to why Chicanas/os place Mexicanas/os at the

bottom of the social hierarchy. She explains that Chicanas/os are simply duplicating what American white society does to them as Chicanas/os, but she fails to analyze the psychological trauma that colonized people have encountered (Memmi, 1965). It is important to further examine the effects of colonialism in order to provide a supportive explanation as to why People of Color place themselves in social hierarchies. *¿Qué Onda? Urban Youth Cultures and Border Identity* is an important piece of work because it touches upon the many intersectionalities that exist within Mexicanas/os and Chicanas/os. Bejarano provides the reader with a very important historical and sociological background in order to understand the complexity of identity construction amongst Mexicanas/os and Chicanas/os.

Notes

¹ Mexicana/o refers to females and males born in Mexico and Chicana/o refers to females and males of Mexican descent born in the United States of America.

² “People of Color” is deliberately capitalized to give subjectivity to formally colonized peoples in the discourse as well as to reverse social hierarchies that privilege whiteness.

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Reviewer

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