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Cynthia L. Bejarano. *¿Qué onda? Urban Youth Culture and Border Identity*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2005. 235p.

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This book by Cynthia Bejarano describes an ethnographic study carried out by the author herself. To complete the study, Bejarano worked closely with a group of adolescents of Mexican descent for four years, tracking their social and educational experiences at Altamira High School. The study sought to identify the identity-building constructions of urban, Latina/o youth living in the “borderlands,” the geographical area along the U.S./Mexico border. The purpose of the study was to better define the factors that led the participants to identify themselves with the various ethnicities encompassed within the term Latina/o: Mexicana/o or Mexican-American/Chicano/a. As Bejarano describes, these varying identities ultimately result in the social stratification of the adolescents into a hierarchy created through discrimination and “internal colonialism” (45). The book begins with a description of the participants and the research setting, followed by seven chapters, each of them focusing on the various stages of her research.

Chapter One provides a thorough introduction to the rest of the book, including a summary of the ethnographic research methods utilized during the study as well as a more detailed introduction to the research participants. It also summarizes the contents of the rest of the book. I find this introduction helpful in providing the necessary contextual background for understanding the rest of the text. Chapter Two provides a review of the literature related to the subject of immigration, with a focus on immigrant youth studies, ethnic self-identity, and the educational experiences of Mexican and Mexican-American/Chicano youth. Bejarano successfully links related research to the notion of Border Theory which she expands on in Chapter Three. The researcher utilizes Border Theory as a framework on which to build the various ethnographies of the participants, thereby approaching the understanding of the issues, the folklore, and the conflicts that led each participant to construct his or her own identity as a Mexicana/o or a Mexican-American/Chicana/o. Although the research studies presented in these pages do provide important background information into this particular field of research, I find the literature section to be relatively brief. I believe the book would benefit from the inclusion of a more thorough review of related literature.

The following chapter includes a detailed discussion of Border Theory. The author clarifies the differences between “borderline” and “borderlands” (23), providing insight into the “geopolitical spaces” (23) that neighbor the US/Mexico

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border. Here, the author includes research carried out by scholars that inhabit these borderlands and have themselves studied the “cultural landscapes” (24) of U.S. border cities and their inhabitants. In her sources, Bejarano also includes artists and performers whose works reflect the multifaceted cultural and political norms of the borderlands. In this chapter, the author provides a thorough discussion of border politics, including issues such as nationalism, discrimination, racism, bilingualism, and monolingualism. All of these issues are nicely weaved into the discussion of Border Theory. A valuable part of this chapter is the inclusion of the participants’ personal experiences while residing in this geopolitical intersection. Through the voices of the participants, Bejarano successfully demonstrates how Border Theory translates into the everyday identity-building social and educational experiences of the youth she followed during the four-year study.

Chapter Four provides the rationale for the study, along with a description of the researcher’s limitations in conducting Latina/o youth-centered research as a “Chicana feminist” (58). In this chapter, Bejarano describes the particular forms of expression that the participants use to identify themselves with a particular group, the interactions between the various groups, the researcher’s access to the participants and the research site, and the author’s personal reflections. Chapter Five includes a discussion of the concept of Mexicana/o and Mexican-American/Chicana/o “AlterNative Youth Cultures” (89), which refers to youths’ appropriation of dress, music, and language in order to separate themselves from the dominant culture. In this discussion, the researcher expresses the importance of style in the shaping of identity and provides a more profound description of how the various elements of style evolve historically, gradually manifesting themselves as purposeful qualifiers for defining their own identities. Once again, Bejarano does a nice job of interweaving the participants’ voices in order to support and clarify her analysis of AlterNative Youth Cultures and their role in defining individuals.

Chapter Six, titled “Serpent Tongues, Social Hierarchies, and National Citizenship,” examines the linguistic variances that further serve to unite and/or separate youth of Mexican descent. The author ties this linguistic variable to citizenship, which further compounded the problem of social hierarchies and discrimination among the participants. The chapter includes a discussion of the cultural norms that separate Mexicana/o and Mexican-American youth, their use of expressions and language (including code-switching), social hierarchies, and internal colonialism. All of these factors, as Bejarano concludes, result in the process of “othering” (167) by Chicanos toward Mexicanos. This “otherization” process is perpetuated by the discrimination that Latinos face from the general American population. The chapter includes with a discussion on citizenship, which, as the author states,

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becomes a part of the “otherization” process. The constant search for self-identity and the need for self-preservation on the part of the participants determined, to a great extent, the value they placed on citizenship. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the experiences of the Mexican participants who had recently arrived and the issues they had to contend with such as the constant fear of being deported, the cultural stigmatization of being undocumented, and their placement on the lower end of the social hierarchy in their school.

The final chapter of Bejarano’s book, subtitled “Negotiating the Middle Spaces of Mexicanness and Other Possibilities,” brings to light the reality of living within the continuum of Mexicanness. She proposes the notion of “cultural citizenship” (186) as an alternative way of accepting Latino cultures. Cultural citizenship recognizes the cultural richness that these individuals bring to the nation. It looks beyond the legality of citizenship and obscures the derogatory stereotypes that have perpetuated conflict and separation. Bejarano concludes with future recommendations for research in the field of identity-building processes as they pertain to youth of Mexican descent and her own concluding thoughts.

Overall, I find this book to be well-written, thorough, and eye-opening. Its organization makes the study easy to follow and the author’s style is clear and concise. This book addresses an important subject that is not included often enough in discussions of minority and/or bilingual education in this country: the causes and effects of the social stratification of urban youth of Mexican descent. This book would be an excellent resource for Teacher Education programs anywhere in the country, particularly those in communities that inhabit the “borderlands.” \*