Homegirls in the Public Sphere by Miranda, Marie (Keta) Review by: Yost, Bambi

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This ethnographic study examines how Mexican-American female gang members in the Fruitvale community of Oakland, California represent themselves in the public realm. This is not just another gang study where a researcher goes into the “hood” to objectively examine issues of gang life, but instead a study of representation itself (Miranda 2003, p. 45). It is a collaborative story of ethics, engagement, enlightenment, and empowerment. Through the eyes and voices of gang members and the author, Marie “Keta” Miranda, we begin to understand the roles of the media and public representation. Cultural stereotypes, patriarchal structures, and expectations of democratic citizenship are challenged. In addition, Miranda’s honest and introspective view of the role and methods of an ethnographer are constantly explored. But most importantly, throughout this study, marginalized youth speak out in defense of who they are and why they matter.

The book is deceptively easy to read. A well-written, frequently poetic dialogue between the author and her subject carries readers through the realities of fieldwork investigation. Through a chronological narrative we are taken into the realm of academic inquiry as well as the political forum of the public realm. Miranda began her study with a thorough theoretical understanding of gangs and gang activity. Although she entered the research with a set
framework of investigation she was not limited by it. As her subjects talked, she listened, and what she heard led her to redirect her focus. Her ability to question assumptions and challenge previous methods makes her an exceptional ethnographer. The linear progression of her “ethnography moves from a study that began with audience reception to a study of girls in gangs to a study of the girls’ representational practices” (Miranda 2003, p. 144).

Miranda does not present this work as a comprehensive study reflecting all aspects of Chicana gangs. Rather, she invites gang members into an informal dialogue of what it means to be represented and included in the public sphere, as well as how public perception and representation can be directed and altered through public discourse and discovery. Miranda challenges the field of gang studies by creating an opportunity for the young women in her study to represent themselves through film and offer criticism and feedback throughout the ethnographic process.

The first three chapters of Homegirls in the Public Sphere set the stage for the study. Chapter 1 is an overview, explaining the need for an expansion of discursive space to “broaden the issues and interests of subaltern publics struggling for democracy and social justice” (Miranda 2003, p. 6).

Chapter 2 provides supporting literary reviews of other ethnographic studies and gang research, reception and representation theory, and a thorough analysis of the social, political, economical, and physical context of Oakland.

In Chapter 3, we learn of Miranda’s process of discovery leading her to the project at hand. Miranda set out to study media representations of Chicano/a youth, with a focus on “gang genre films” such as Boyz N the Hood, American Me, Bound by Honor, and Mi Vida Loca (Miranda 2003, p. 21). She planned to interview Latina teenagers, members of a pan-gang alliance called Norteñas With Attitude (N.W.A.) at the Centro de Juventud, a community center in Fruitvale. However, her subjects’ reactions to her questions about images of gangs in the mainstream media prompted her to reevaluate and, ultimately, to revise her project’s focus. Initially designed as a study about the reactions of female
gang members to male-dominated media images of gang life, the project was refocused around the concerns of the participants: the logistics and significance of being a homegirl. Miranda found that, instead of talking about representations—or the lack thereof—of Latinas in these films and in the mainstream media in general, the “girls wanted to talk about their lives” (Miranda 2003, p. 33). Indeed, they “felt the drive and impulse to talk about themselves” precisely because of the absence of young women in dominant media representations of gangs and gangsters (Miranda 2003, p. 43).

Female gang members are not typically viewed as valuable citizens of traditional society. Unlike their male counterparts, they have never shared the glorified and sensationalized image of famous American gangster icons like The Godfather’s Vito Corleone. In American popular culture, stories of patriarchal gangs have symbolized many American ideals—honor, initiative, laissez-faire capitalism, self-reinvention, vigilante justice, street-smarts, masculine bravado, and power (Ramirez 2004, p. 1135). These ideals, however, are reserved for men, not women. Gang women are commonly misconceived as auxiliaries, sexual objects, and pawns of gang culture. As a team, the girls in the study worked together with Miranda to develop a public campaign aimed at demystifying and clarifying the roles of Chicana females in girl gangs.

Four chapters in Homegirls in the Public Sphere are dedicated to examining the ways in which the young women of Norteñas With Attitude spoke about themselves in various public forums. Chapters 4 and 5 are about the video entitled It’s a Homie Thang! which the members of Norteñas With Attitude created with Miranda as a public service announcement for a local cable channel in 1994.

In chapter 4, Miranda provides a textual analysis and a production summary of the 12-minute ethnographic film. The video revolves around twin themes of sameness and difference. It challenges preconceptions that gang association is based on pathological, socially destructive behavior, proposing instead that members are “regular” teens with specific needs and issues. Peer interviews
conducted in favorite hangouts reveal typical preferences, behaviors, and attitudes. Topics covered include language, stereotypes, membership, origin stories, enemies and fights, poetry, appearance and body language, and the practice of “hangin’” or “kickin’ it” with the girls.

However, what is not revealed in this scripted film is the self-censored behavior exhibited by the girls while creating it. Miranda had the girls videotape themselves as they made their public video. What their private, behind-the-scenes video reveals is a counterculture to the one they chose to represent on public television. What they do in private, like smoking, exhibiting tattoos, doing drugs, and other stereotypical but nonetheless, realistic things, were not portrayed in the video made for mainstream America. This dichotomy challenged Miranda to invite discussions about what should and should not be shown and why.

The girls function with multiple identities. In one setting, they are members of tough street gangs known for fist-fighting and independence. In another setting, they are members of families with siblings and parents. Still other settings, such as public parks, reveal them to be typical teens in peer-to-peer relationships talking about boys and sex and other expected topics. The girls’ awareness of their representation to the public influenced the videos they produced. The girls were consciously creating a new image of themselves and chose to focus on the positive aspects of being gang members.

Chapter 5 highlights primary social networks for gang members based upon friendship rather than kinship. This chapter examines the formation and structure of the three gangs which comprise the Norteñas With Attitude alliance: Da Crew, Las Norteñas, and East Side Norteñas. Miranda stresses the bonds of friendship found in the girls’ gangs, with a focus on romantic friendships as a form of homosocial bonding and comadrazgo (fictive kinship relations among women). In arguing that “the young women utilize forms of unity and solidarity borrowed from the domestic sphere [e.g., comadrazgo]...to consolidate a feminine culture in public space,” this chapter maps and questions the boundaries of private
and public (Miranda, 2003, p. 79). By spending time together, Chicana Homegirls monitor and influence each other’s behavior, offering advice and support for romantic relationships, family problems and fights with rivals. The peer group also provides an autonomous arena for teen girls to create an identity in opposition to sexual objectification. Adopting an androgynous dress style and aggressive posture and speech patterns, Chicana gang members base their sense of self-worth on fighting prowess and peer support rather than competition for boys.

Chapters 6 and 7 document the girls’ reactions to and self-representations in public discourse about themselves. Describing their reception and participation in three venues that represent what Miranda describes as “the Chicana/o counter public sphere” (Miranda 2003, p. 143) (a conference of the Latino Police Officers Association held in Oakland in 1993; a regional meeting of the National Association for Chicano/Chicana Studies at the University of California at Santa Cruz in 1994; and a presentation at a health care clinic in Fruitvale), Miranda details alternating experiences of alienation and empowerment as the Homegirls adjust to the agendas and expectations of their audiences. In the health clinic, for example, they had been invited to give a presentation on the rising incidence of physical violence. The clinic staff, however, undermined the girls’ statements about fights with boys by challenging their rationale for fighting at all and asking questions about teen pregnancy, defining female gangs in terms of dysfunctional sexuality. The girls were extremely upset over their inability to be heard in spite of being invited to speak.

Miranda does an exceptionally good job of describing her decisions, methods, documents, and analysis. She recognized that the field of gang studies typically positions gangs “in the ‘street,’ the ‘hood”’ (Miranda 2003, p. 3) and she sought to remove herself from this preconceived context in an attempt to gain a more authentic perspective. She therefore studied Chicana gangs in settings like parks, community centers, homes, and public forums—“out of conventional ‘turf’ to examine their discursive practices as the strategies of the oppressed in counter or subaltern spheres” (Miranda 2003, p. 3–4).
Homegirls in the Public Sphere challenges how anthropologists “represent gangs and in what setting and locations we choose to provide thick description” (Miranda 2003, p. 155). The book defines and explains N.W.A. and the gangs that compose it via an analysis of their politics—their relationship to other organizations and institutions, such as the Centro de Juventud and the University of California—as well as their relationships to one another.

Ramona Pérez commented in her book review of Homegirls in the Public Sphere,

Notably, Miranda was unable to conduct a reception study of [It’s a Homie Thang!] because many participants had told their parents that they no longer belonged to the gang and feared that public screenings would generate conflict over their continued membership. This raises further concerns about how young women are disenfranchised not only in public discourse and popular representation but also at home (Pérez 2005).

One of the most significant things lacking in this book is the video and supporting imagery that is so well-described and discussed. Without the visual media, we are left to interpret them through the text alone. Some photographs are provided at the beginning of the book, but because they are of the street and of girls exhibiting tattoos and gang signs, rather than bonding with their families, interacting with their peers or appearing in public forums, they are promoting the stereotypical representation of Chicana gang members. Images of the “regular” life and ordinary places incorporated into the narrative would have greatly added to Miranda’s argument. In spite of the contradictory visuals, I found the literary imagery to be exceptionally strong and clear. Perhaps the first few pages of stereotypical images are intended to set the stage so that by the time the reader finishes creating images from text, they are left with a much richer understanding of the term representation. Regardless, I think that either removing all of the images or incorporating images chosen by the participants would better reinforce the notion of representation.

At times the lack of detail about participants—their ages, family background, biographies, and gang conduct—is frustrating, but is a
result, no doubt, of the author’s concern with protecting her informants.

Despite these gaps, *Homegirls in the Public Sphere* is an exceptional ethnographic study for many reasons. It focuses on young Latinas and their personal relationships with one another, as well as the complexity of their public relationship with society. It is also self-consciously a product of the Chicana gangs’ agency. In addition, this research expands the field of gang studies by challenging perceptions of race, ethnicity, gender, class, and family and community ties among young Latinas. Further, through this study we are asked to question the politics of representation surrounding marginalized Chicana gang youth. Finally, this text has been used for instruction in many disciplines including women’s studies, Latino/a studies, anthropology, public policy and criminology. It prompts scholars of any discipline with an interest in gangs to ask: Is it possible to study or represent the ghetto or barrio without objectifying it and its subaltern community members? If so, how?

In conclusion, *Homegirls in the Public Sphere* highlights the possibilities and challenges of studying gangs within the particular discipline of anthropology, and with a particular method, ethnography. Underlying this entire project is a belief that by sharing stories, youth have the power to evoke change. As a narrative written to provoke discussion and thought about an otherwise disregarded population, Miranda succeeds.

**References**


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