



# Que Onda?: Urban Youth Culture and Border Identity

*Cynthia L. Bejarano*



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Angel was born in Arizona and is part of the in-crowd. She likes clubbing, dancing, and going to car shows. Betzayra is from Mexico City and, despite polio-related disabilities, is the confident group leader of the Mexican girls. Arturo is also from Mexico City; he dresses more fashionably than most other boys and is taunted by the Chicanos. Evelyn was born in Arizona, but her mother was from Mexico and she hangs out with Mexican kids because she thinks they're nicer than Chicanos. How these and some two dozen other young Latinas and Latinos interact forms the basis of a penetrating new study of identity formation among Mexican-origin border youths, taking readers directly into their world to reveal the labyrinth they navigate to shape their identities.

For Latina/o adolescents who already find life challenging, the borderland is a place that presents continual affirmations of and contradictions about identity—questions of who is more Mexican than American or vice versa. This book analyzes the construction of Mexicana/o and Chicana/o identities through a four-year ethnographic study in a representative American high school. It reveals how identity politics impacts young people's forms of communication and the cultural spaces they occupy in the school setting. By showing how identities are created and directly influenced by the complexities of geopolitics and sociocultural influences, it stresses the largely unexplored divisions among youths whose identities are located along a wide continuum of “Mexicanness.”

Through in-depth interviews and focus groups with both Mexicana/o and Chicana/o students, Cynthia Bejarano explores such topics as the creation of distinct styles that reinforce differences between the two groups; the use of language to further distinguish themselves from one another; and social stratification perpetuated by internal colonialism and the “Othering” process. These and other issues are shown to complicate how Latinas/os ethnically identify as Mexicanas/os or Chicanas/os and help explain how they get to this point.

In contrast to research that views identity as a reflection of immigration or educational experiences, this study embraces border theory to frame the complex and conflicted relations of adolescents as a result of their identity-making processes. This intimate glimpse into their lives provides valuable information about the diversity among youths and their constant efforts to create, define, and shape their identities according to cultural and social structures.

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