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## 'Muy Macha': Gender and Ideology in Gang-Girls' Discourse about Makeup\*

*The body is the inscribed surface of events.*

Michel Foucault

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*This article explores how notions of power, femininity, and ethnicity permeate the discourses of and around girls involved in gangs. I explore how the cholas - Latina gang girls - of Foxbury perform and inscribe on their bodies a specific kind of femininity that not only confounds wider community notions of how girls should act, dress, and talk, but throws into question the very gendered category that girls are expected to inhabit.*

Early in the fall of 1995, the nationally-syndicated American television talk show, *Geraldo*, featured a special show on makeovers. An otherwise pedestrian topic, commonplace on daytime television, had a twist this time: today Geraldo was going to show us makeovers of six girls who were involved in gangs. 'Uncovering the hidden beauty within' was the subtitle of the show, a mantra repeated at the opening of every commercial break.

Geraldo Rivera (the former Jerry Rivers), the talk show host, introduced the gang girls in question and the guest makeup artists who were to unlock the hidden, secret beauty of these young women. The hair and makeup artists were all prominent New York City salon stylists, and they were joined by a fashion consultant who was to help in choosing new clothes. One by one, six girls between the ages of fifteen and twenty came out in their 'regular' clothes: big white T-shirts, large, pleated khaki pants, called Dickies, Pendleton plaid wool jackets, and severe dark makeup. Linda, the second girl, was wearing a beanie, a black wool ski cap that covered her entire head and forehead, including her eyebrows. Many of the girls wore deep, dark eyeliner that extended the line of their eyes to their temples, and some of them wore black lipstick. Geraldo introduced them - all the girls but one were African-American and/or Latina. Two of the girls were Nuyorican twin sisters, accompanied to

the show by their mom. The girls stood serious and proud before the cameras in sideways poses, one shoulder thrust forward, hands deep in their pockets, feet perpendicular to each other, and tilted-back heads that looked *down* at the cameras.

Fifteen minutes later, the girls had been transformed: they paraded out from the side wings in tiny wool sweaters, miniskirts, heathered tights and high-heeled Mary Janes. At each girl's appearance, the audience would cheer and clap, and Geraldo and his makeup artists would discuss the transformation: 'She really is *such* a pretty girl,' gushed the coiffeuse, 'all I did was give her [hair] some lift and bounce.' Linda of the beanie came out in a mass of curls, looking a little confused. She was wearing a short black jumper with black tights and a fitted white shirt with huge dangling cuffs. Her jumper had no pockets, and she wrung her hands distractedly. 'You look sooo ... *feminine!*' remarked Geraldo, exhorting the audience to admire the difference between the 'before' and 'after' pictures. The audience oohed approvingly, and Geraldo bounded up to Linda to ask her whether she would continue to dress like this. 'Um, yeah,' Linda said rather unenthusiastically. 'Maybe.'

## Bad Girls and Drag Queens

This episode of the Geraldo show is based on the premise that there is something aberrant, unfeminine, and *rectifiable* about girls who are involved in gangs. What is it that is so unsettling to Geraldo and to the rest of the public, obsessed as we are with representations – including this paper – of ‘bad girls’? And what laws of gender are the girls breaking, such that it is deemed necessary to give them correctional and rehabilitative therapies like makeovers and juvenile halls?<sup>1</sup>

In discussing how notions of power, femininity, and ethnicity permeate the discourses of and around girls involved in gangs, I use data distilled from sociolinguistic interviews and from observations and recordings of naturalistic interactions conducted over the course of two and a half years of ethnographic fieldwork. I explore how the *cholas* – Latina gang girls – of Foxbury<sup>2</sup> perform and inscribe on their bodies a specific kind of femininity that not only confounds wider community notions of how girls should act, dress, and talk, but throws into question the very gendered category that girls are expected to inhabit.

In this article I elaborate on contemporary understandings of play as performance and gender as performance (Turner 1982; Butler 1990; 1995), specifically calling drag queens to the rescue in understanding the politics and

aesthetics of cholas, and what – if anything – it may be that these different systems of gendered symbolic display have in common.

Critical theoretic approaches to drag have generated many questions about the status of the subject. Is there an a priori gendered subject *before* drag? Similarly, we may ask if there is an a priori girl-subject before the chola. Is it the case that underneath the hard exterior of the chola there is a little girl, waiting to be coaxed out? Certainly this is the assumption underlying the 'Gang Girl Makeovers' segment of the Geraldo show. Its mission of 'uncovering the hidden beauty within' assumes an underlying feminine gendered subject, and proposes that, if only the girls could see for themselves how pretty they might be 'inside,' if only they could realize some deep inner wish for femininity, then they could/would stop being gang members.

In her analysis of Jennie Livingston's *Paris is Burning*, a quasi-ethnographic film about African-American and Latina drag queens in New York City, Butler poses the next logical question in the debate: Is *all* of gender drag? She explains:

To claim that all gender is like drag, or is drag, is to suggest that 'imitation' is at the heart of the heterosexual project and its gender binarisms, that drag is not a secondary imitation that presupposes a prior and original gender, but that hegemonic heterosexuality is itself a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations. That it must repeat this imitation, that it sets up pathologizing practices and normalizing sciences in order to produce and consecrate its own claim on originality and propriety, suggests that heterosexual performativity is beset by an anxiety that it can never fully overcome, that its effort to become its own idealizations can never be finally or fully achieved, and that it is consistently haunted by that domain of sexual possibility that must be excluded for heterosexualized gender to produce itself (1995:125).

Questioning the 'naturalness' of gender and showing the ways in which it is socially constructed, and the attendant disciplinary and punitive methods that aid this construct, are two of the main thrusts of contemporary feminist theory.<sup>3</sup> In this article I incorporate anthropological and philosophical notions of cultural/gender performativity specifically to address performative styles that overtly use the 'tools' of one kind of performativity to achieve another. Drag, for instance, uses the tools of feminine gender performance to achieve a radical de-stabilization of hegemonic masculine gender norms. It also indexes, like all social play and social dramas (Turner 1982), agonistic struggles and underlying tensions within society.



De-stabilization of gender norms is by no means the only effect of drag performances, however. Drag has the potential for reinforcing and policing the boundaries of the heterosexual project, of naming what is feminine, and holding us to it, so that drag queens, as Butler puts it (1995:132), out-woman women. Contrapositively, cholas in California personify and to some extent dictate what good girls are not: they *are* the girls that Moms, and the police, now warn us about. And their gender transgressions are always apparent, with their penchant for beating up boys, forming exclusive female societies, and cultivating an appearance that refuses to conform to either Mexican or American notions of what little girls are made of: 'My dad *dice que me miro como* lesbian (My dad says I look like a lesbian),' reports fourteen-year-old Maureen.

The threatening nature of these girlish transgressions is evident in police attitudes toward cholas. The 1993 *Gang Training Seminar Handbook* of the Northern California Gang Investigators Association attributes some rather mysterious powers to gang members:

Typical gang members are intelligent but may lack formal education. They are 'street smart,' able to fend for themselves, and are accomplished in the art of manipulation (Donovan 1993:24).

Cholas are also perceived as threatening by the teachers, who, in collusion with and under direction of the police, have attempted to outlaw bandannas, white T-shirts, all gang colors, including red, blue, brown, white, green and purple, and in one school have installed the ultimate Foucauldian Panopticon of see-through windows in the boys' restrooms.<sup>4</sup> Cholas are also threatening to some of the Euro-American kids in the school who criticize them – but never to their faces – for wearing *sarapes* (a type of traditional Mexican long wool poncho) to school. As Judy, a self-consciously trendy Euro-American girl once told me: 'Those Mexicans in the blankets, those cholos, they think they're so tough, they think they're so hard.' And yet, other groups clearly imitate chola style, especially the punks, boys *and* girls, who traffic in *bricolage*, and copy chola makeup techniques to the utter dismay of the 'owners' of the style.

The symbolic and unconventional use of makeup among the girls that I discuss in this paper literally paints gender and ethnicity on their bodies. In this display, the girls embody the ideology of what it means to be a chola, and write on their faces a semiotics that works parallel to and in careful concert

with other symbolic behaviors all focusing toward the same end: the articulation of a distinct style, different from their parents, who continually ask why their little girls must dress like this, when we have none of this in Mexico, it must be all of this bad American influence. A style distinct from the mainstream, which is convinced that they must be acting like this *because* they are Mexican, and a style distinct from that of other subaltern groups within the school, now in alliance and now in conflict with the various articulations of African-American and Asian-American identities, but always questioning and underlining the various tensions extant within the Mexican diaspora. Both signifier and signified, the cholas' bodies are inscribed with the traces of conflict: assimilation, ethnic pride, covert prestige and the pride of survival are all etched on the surface of their skins, rewritten every morning in the mirror with the help of Maybelline, Wet n' Wild, and Cover Girl.

### Ethnographic Notes

My study emerges out of ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted for over two years in a Northern California urban public high school, which I will call Sor Juana High School (SJHS). SJHS is located in a small urban setting, and is a school like many others in the area, where the majority of the students are students of color, and over half of that majority is Latina. Located in Santa Clara County which has the fourth largest Hispanic population in the state of California (Camarillo 1985:106), SJHS has changed in the past ten years from a predominantly white school serving one of the wealthiest communities in the Silicon Valley to a predominantly 'minority' school that draws many of its students from nearby neighborhoods that reflect the profound demographic changes in the area.

As in many other schools across the nation (Monti 1994), street gangs have come to play a part in the social networks of all ethnic groups at Sor Juana High School. However, the definition of a 'gang' by the police, by school administrators, and by members themselves is ever more inclusive, sweeping in its wake everything from hard-core incarcerated gang members to 'wannabe's,' groups of young people who participate in the symbolic display of gang culture (e.g. by writing gang slogans or graffiti on their school notebooks, or by wearing baggy clothes) but have little to do with the more committed aspects of gang affiliation.

There are many different shades along the continua of youth groups at SJHS. Some of these groups call themselves gangs, while other not dissimilar groups call themselves Girl Scouts, or Student Government, or ROTC.<sup>5</sup>

These youth groups have various differing aims, but they all take part in the universal youth processes of cohorting and of challenging oneself via ritual processes to the next stage of the life cycle (Turner 1982). This process of ritualization of interactions and reification of social identity is pregnant with the potential for social drama, for the expression of perennially existing and often dormant ruptures in the social fabric.

Among the Latinas/os in Northern California, gang alliances mirror the larger politics of the Latina/o community in the state (Camarillo 1985; Donovan 1993). The polar extremes of the Latinas/os in the school consist of a group of mostly recent immigrants who identify with a Mexican identity, called Sureñas/os (Southerners); and another group of Latinas/os, usually U.S. born, who identify with an English-dominant, bicultural Chicana/o identity, and call themselves Norteñas/os (Northerners). Although Sureñas and Norteñas<sup>6</sup> are technically of the same ethnicity (indeed, sometimes their parents are from the same towns in Mexico), they are in deep conflict over the politics of identity in their community, and this conflict is reflected in their language attitudes, discourse patterns, and eventual success (or lack thereof) in the American educational system. Here I want to stress that although the extreme ends of this social/symbolic continuum are consistent with a binary split between Chicanas and Mexicanas, in reality there is everything in between, and the groups are both fluid and rigid at the same time. The ethnic-nationalistic ideology articulated by both groups is clear about membership requirements, but the rosters are filled by diverse, rotating groups of people with varied life experiences. Thus, there are Chicana Sureñas, Mexican-born Norteñas, and different combinations of ethnicity, language, and nationality in both groups, recalling Freud's 'narcissism of small differences.'

At any given time, a member of one group, if she feels that her friends have not stood by her, has a legitimate right to switch to the other group, and may then start tapping different facets of her cultural resources.

The following table outlines some of the symbolic repertoire that the girls use in their everyday drive to make meaning:

Name	Norteñas	Sureñas
Color	Red Burgundy	Blue Navy
Indexical Place	The North	The South
Football Team	San Francisco 49ers	Los Angeles Raiders
Music	Motown Oldies	Banda
Hairdo	Feathered hair	Vertical ponytail
Eyeliners	Solid first, then liquid	Solid only
Lipstick	Deep red/burgundy lipstick	Brown lipstick

Table 1: Symbolic Markers of Chicana and Mexican Gang Identity

This table charts some of the symbolic markers that signal identity for the Norteñas and the Sureñas. Each gang has adopted a symbolic color that members make their uniform, often wearing variations of that color in at least one article of clothing every day, and occasionally wearing entire outfits composed of the color.<sup>7</sup> In addition, since the conflict is ideological and has nationalistic bases, there is an indexical relationship to place as well, so that the North is symbolic of Chicanas, and the South of Mexicanas. Broadly allegorical, concepts of 'North' and 'South' have even been transferred to sports team allegiances, with Norteñas supporting the San Francisco 49ers football team, and Sureñas that of the L.A. Raiders.<sup>8</sup>

Sureñas additionally place great importance in keeping up with the latest youth culture developments in Mexico. Thus, they are great aficionadas of Banda music, a fast-paced type of polka which is the height of the *avant-garde* in Mexican rural areas. Not for them is the urban, Western-oriented creolized forms of Mexican Rock music known as RNE - Rock en Español. Rock en Español is in their view associated with the wealthy *fresas*<sup>9</sup> of the Mexican megalopolises - reminiscent precisely of the type of color- and class-based oppression that many of them have fled in the first place.

Norteñas, for their part, have adopted as part of their symbolic capital a specific type of American music that they call 'Oldies.' These Oldies are mostly drawn from the late 1950s and early 1960s recordings of African-American artists under the Motown label. Some of the songs included in this time period are 'Angel Baby,' 'Duke of Earl,' and 'Lowrider,' as well as many of the



Doowop hits by artists such as The Platters, The Penguins, The Marvelettes, and The Lovelites, to name a few. The marked popularity among very young people of these older songs is an interesting phenomenon in itself, for the songs serve as an isogloss that demarcates the broader community of Chicanas. Oldies, though sung primarily by African-Americans, are Chicana music *par excellence*, closely identified with the main time period of the struggle of the Farm Worker Movement.<sup>10</sup> It is the music that Norteñas' mothers and grandmothers listened to – thus the songs are gravid with meaning for Norteñas since they are active reminders of the continuity of young Chicanas' history.

Additionally, there are differences in the symbology of Norteña and Sureña hair, eyeliner, and lipstick, crucial to members' identification of each others' allegiance. Long, feathered hair often marks Norteña membership, in contrast with a hairstyle that I have termed a 'vertical ponytail,' characteristic of Sureñas and consisting of straight long hair, with the portion above the ears gel-slicked close to the head and gathered into an orderly ponytail cascading from the top of the head. In both cases, however, the hair must be long.<sup>11</sup>

Different methods of applying eyeliner look completely different, and are easily visible at distances of several feet. Liquid eyeliner, for example, has a more defined, 'sharper' outline than solid eyeliner, and solid eyeliner looks different if used alone vs. in conjunction with liquid. Try this at home. Eyeliner is an effective method of identification since it can be worn by itself and without any of the other symbolic markers, making the girls easily distinguishable to each other but inscrutable (and indeed, frightening) to anyone else. Brown and red lipstick – different even to the naïve observer – also differentiate the girls from each other, with Sureñas wearing brown eyeliner as lipstick, and Norteñas wearing red or burgundy lipstick.

Despite all of these differences, there are many similarities in general style that members of both of these groups have, and common signalling devices that they recognize across boundaries. I will talk about some of the similarities in the following sections.

### The Lexicon of Makeup

I was originally intrigued to look into this topic because I found over and over in my data remarks about eyeliner. Whenever I would ask 'How do you know who is a chola?' girls would mention eyeliner as one of the principal markers of identity. Xiomara, a Sureña, once pointed out to me all of her

chola friends, and then gave me the following heuristic: 'If you want to know who's a chola, just look for the eyeliner. Everybody could notice that that's a chola.' The public nature of the eyeliner, and its commonly agreed-to meaning, with length of eyeliner signaling intention as well as willingness to fight, is evidenced in girls repeatedly interpreting long eyeliner as a provocation, as well as by remarks like the following, from a diminutive Norteña whom I will call Xochitl: 'When I wear my eyeliner, *me siento más macha* (I feel more macha), I'm ready to fight.'

Some of the ways in which cholas conceptualize power with respect to eyeliner are captured in the following transcript of a conversation that I had with a chola whom I will call Babygirl. Babygirl is one of the top leaders of a neighborhood group of Norteñas, a large group that despite what the police or city council might think, 'runs' Foxbury. If the need should arise, up to seventy Norteñas are 'down for' this neighborhood, and will be commanded by Babygirl to defend territory, pursue unfriendly boy trespassers and, as they say, 'take care of business.' This particular neighborhood is for all intents and purposes a girl-dominated space.

Babygirl and I had been introduced earlier in the week before this exchange, and hit it off very well. At that time I had been serving as an after-school tutor in her school, and had wanted to meet her for a long time, since it was obvious that she was an important person in the social landscape of the community. I finally gained an introduction to her through one of the boys I had been tutoring who was friendly with her. We began to get to know each other, and eventually she invited me over to her house for the afternoon. While at her house, we started discussing chola style, and she played Oldies for me ('Duke of Earl' is her favorite) and showed me the various physical aspects of chola style. She painstakingly showed me how she applies her makeup, and then proceeded to put it on me, remarking admiringly on the change. At one point she drew in my eyeliner, long and hard, and we had the following interaction:

- |          |  |
|----------|--|
| BABYGIRL | You would never be noticed like you were a fucking teacher.<br>Doesn't it make you have power, doesn't it just ... |
| NORMA    | I don't even recognize myself.   |
| BABYGIRL | Think about all the shit.<br>You're hard.  |

Nobody could fuck with you,  
you got power.  
People look at you,  
but nobody fucks with you.  
So when you walk down the street,  
you got the special walk, [*begins to walk deliberately,  
swinging her upper body*]  
you walk like this,  
you walk all slow,  
just checking it out.  
I look like a dude, ¿qué no? (don't I?)  
I walk, and then I stop.  
I go like this [*tilts head back – this is called looking 'in'*]  
I always look in, I always look in,  
I never look down.  
It's all about power.  
You never fucking smile.  
Fucking never smile.  
We never wear earrings,  
just in case we get in a fight.  
It's not our style to wear earrings, ¿me entiendes? (you know?)  
Don't ever smile.  
That's the weak spot.  
Don't ever smile.

NORMA                    Hhhnhhnhhn. [*laughing*]

BABYGIRL Cause that's the weak spot.

NORMA Uh-huh.

**BABYGIRL.** Look, just look all tough, like this,  
OK, I'll throw a four, like this,  
and then you throw a one.<sup>12</sup>  
Like that, looks baaad.  
And if you're at a party,  
and you see a dude that you like,  
don't ever smile.  
Just walk up to him and kiss him.

In this excerpt, Babygirl articulates much of what is powerful about cholas' use of eyeliner. She highlights a power-based interpretation of her own makeup practices, where her inscrutability and threatening demeanor allow

her to go wherever she wants, and command the kind of attention and respect that is not usually given to little girls: 'Everybody looks at you but nobody fucks with you.' Later, while writing this paper, I called up Babygirl to check on a couple of facts, and she told me the following:

Don't forget to tell them that eyeliner is really important. When I turn on the eyeliner, when I really put it on, you know long and shit, it makes me feel like another person, it makes me feel tough. Just wearing the eyeliner even without the clothes makes me feel brave.

In addition to explanations involving power and toughness, cholas also invoke ethnicity to rationalize other choices regarding makeup, so that when the discussion turns to lipstick and foundation, ethnicity-based explanations emerge. The rule of thumb is that, since being Norteña and Sureña involves highlighting a Mexican-based identity of some sort, then dark skin is something that is valued.

Dimples and Juana, two Sureñas who were making themselves up in the locker room one day, gave me advice on what sort of foundation to wear: 'Always wear brown cause that's the color of your skin. You have to use darker cover-up. You can't wear cover-up lighter than you cause they tell you that you want to be white. You gotta do it darker than your skin, or the same color as your skin. I'm making yours darker cause you're morena.'

This aesthetic is so pervasive that it affects Latina girls who are fair-skinned (and there are a lot of them, since one of the key sending states in immigration, Michoacán, has a large population of French descent, especially in the impoverished rural areas). One particularly fair Sureña wears foundation that is about three shades darker than her face, as well as dark contact lenses to cover up her light eyes. Sureñas sometimes also dye their hair black, but Norteñas may dye it reddish. Blue hair would be completely out of the question, however, since that style is clearly marked as 'punk', or in other words, white.

Another reason that the girls cite for wearing very heavy foundation is that if it should happen that you get in a fight, then heavy foundation masks the bruises from the teachers and parents. If you feather your hair right, I am told, and you wear heavy enough foundation, no one can tell that you were in a fight. Here the technology of femininity is used as an instrument to outwardly display stance, to reify ethnic ideals, as well as to mask behavior that can have negative repercussions from the girls' perspective.

As far as body image, the body ideal, like almost every other physical ideal, of the cholas is wilfully and radically opposed to what is valued within the Euro-American matrix. Since the chola hierarchy is partly based on physical power, girls who are physically powerful, in the sense that they can beat up other cholas and cholos, are at the top of the hierarchy. All of the top leaders, the downest cholas, of the various groups that I have met over the course of my fieldwork have been fairly zaftig girls. They are considered the most powerful, beautiful, and sexy, and they pride themselves on turning every single head in a room as they walk in. They are often quite athletic. Babygirl, for instance, was captain of the basketball team and Most Valuable Player two years in a row. These girls pride themselves on both substantial size and physical power. And they make merciless fun of Euro-American girls' preoccupation with weight and with food issues.

In the spring of 1994, I went to a Norteña *quinceañera* or fifteenth birthday party, a kind of traditional Mexican debutante ball. Every plate, dish, dress, napkin, flower, and curtain in the whole place was red, and most of the guests were prominent Norteños. First came the religious ceremony, a Catholic mass (where the *quinceañera* walked down the aisle wearing a beautiful white dress and long eyeliner), and then there was a party, with lots of food. As the party got going, Babygirl and a Norteña friend of hers, Pati, and I were standing in line to take some food. Right ahead of us there was an Anglo Norteña, who was fretting about the food, and hesitant to take very much of it because she felt that it was embarrassing to eat in front of boys. Babygirl and Pati looked at each other in disbelief, and when we returned to our table they severely criticized the girl and intimated that she was not really a down Norteña because she had Anglo attitudes toward food. A real Norteña, they said, would never be embarrassed to eat in front of anybody. 'We feel proud of ourselves and our bodies,' they snapped defensively, aware of the intrusion of the aesthetics of the other, 'we look good like this. Norteñas don't diet.'

### Theorizing Cosmetics

One of the very interesting features of all of this discourse is that it fits uneasily within recent feminist writings on makeup and the body. Whereas most of the recent writings emphasize the totalizing power of advertising and normative cultural practices, there is little effort to examine the fragmented standpoints from which women operate. To be sure, much of the work being done is extremely valuable in exposing overall tendencies. We can hardly argue with Bordo 1993, who writes:

The general tyranny of fashion – perpetual, elusive, and instructing the female body in a pedagogy of personal inadequacy and lack – is a powerful discipline for all women in this culture. But even as we are all normalized to the requirements of appropriate feminine insecurity and preoccupation with appearance, more specific requirements emerge in different cultural and historical contexts, and for different groups. When Bo Derek put her hair in corn rows, she was engaging in a normalizing feminine practice. But when Oprah Winfrey admitted on her show that all her life she had desperately longed to have hair that swings from side to side as she shakes her head, she revealed the power of racial and gender normalization, normalization not only to 'femininity,' but to the Caucasian beauty standards that still dominate on television, in movies, in popular magazines. Neither Oprah nor the ... many women who ironed their hair in the 1960s have creatively or playfully invented themselves here.

Bordo's discussion above assumes that 'all women in this culture' orient to the same hegemonic ideals of beauty that are supplied through the various media for public consumption. This model does not say that all women are the same, but it places different women as similarly oriented to the mainstream: for instance, one can be Latina, African-American, or Asian-American, and still be attending to the dominant Euro-American hegemonic norms, creating what I will call the 'Oprah effect' – when members of minority groups judge themselves by the aesthetic norms of the dominant group. The same assumption of a single orientation, a singly defined 'eye' that women cast on each other, underlies the discussion by Goldstein (1995:315), who in her analysis of home makeup videos, writes:

The transformation of the innocent gaze into one of critical judgment, which occurs upon entry to the world of beauty, is at once social and subjective; it is aimed at other women and at oneself. This combination of equalizing (standardizing) and effacing emphasizes that together women potentially constitute what I will call a 'female aesthetic community' while it finesses what might otherwise divide or unite them. This community is democratic, and, in its erasure of difference, oddly utopian.

Here I am not arguing against the powerful, generalized and pervasive nature of the disciplining practices that contemporary society reserves for women, but I do want to make clear that when the technology of femininity is used for unintended ends, there is a moment of rupture that can open up new possibilities within the system. The fact that the girls often refuse to use cosmetics for their intended purposes, both at the micro-level, where the pre-



ferred lipstick is actually brown eyeliner in many cases, and at the macro-level where foundation is used to signal ethnic pride no matter what one's skin tone, this is completely destabilizing to the way that we can understand them and how their symbolic cosmetic system works, and is the reason they are read as unfeminine and threatening. Other people know that there is something going on symbolically, but they don't know what. It is as though cholas are ungrammatical: they use the elements of a symbolic system that we are thoroughly familiar with, but refuse to conform to Goldsteinian (hegemonic) community notions of how these symbols ought to be used. What they are to 'mean' is no longer recoverable from the surface.

This refusal of the hegemonic paradigm allows us to realize that these young women are completely differently situated and *not orienting* to much of the normative discourse. I would propose that the cholas (and many other subaltern groups with their own aesthetic norms) are not only outside of the 'female aesthetic community' but want no part of it, actively rebuffing and contradicting it. In the whole two and a half years of my fieldwork, I did not see a single chola reading a mainstream (or any kind of) fashion magazine. For a brief and singular period, these girls are free from the 'Oprah effect.'

Despite this differential standpoint, using the tools of but standing outside mainstream feminine consumerist culture, many of the cholas that I have interviewed share the assumptions of Geraldo Rivera, with which I began this paper. As they move out of gang participation, they echo the idea that dressing like a *chola* is unfeminine. Here is an excerpt from an interview with a fifteen-year-old girl who has been involved off and on with the Sureñas, and whom I will call Agata:

Eighth and ninth grade I was in a gang,  
and I was blue.  
I moved, and I got out of it  
and I grew up totally,  
I started dressing up like a young lady,  
and then I got,  
I started wearing Dickies [bagsy khaki pants] again, and fighting,  
and doing dumb stuff....

Agata here distances herself from her *chola* behavior, since at the point where I am interviewing her she is trying to stay away from being a Sureña. For her, 'dressing like a young lady,' could be translated as 'not dressing like a chola', as is the case with Raisa, who is trying to distance herself from the Norteñas

as she heads off for college, and complains about her chola friends: 'They should stop wearing Dickies and start dressing like girls, you know, they have to grow out of it.'

The fact is that, as the girls in my study pass from their teens to their early twenties and cease to identify as cholas, I am increasingly finding 'coming of age' narratives, where girls speak of gang participation as the transition to adulthood, and equate getting out of the gangs with growing older. As Rebecca, a twenty-one-year-old ex-Norteña, said to me, 'You can't be a teenybopper forever.' Rebecca is now in college, and she and her former homegirls are still close although most of them now have new friends, or are married, or have kids. Rebecca doesn't dress like a chola anymore, but I have also noticed other changes about her – in college, she has started worrying more about her appearance vis-à-vis mainstream norms (her college is populated mostly by Euro-American students), and she has gone on a diet. She also has begun to mainstream various aspects of her persona. Gone is the eyeliner, the Dickies and even the Chicano English intonation.

Can we analogize between cholas and drag? Would it be correct to say that Rebecca stopped being in gang-girl drag and returned to Goldstein's female aesthetic community? Is that the original gendered subject?

One last example I would like to present is one of a girl whom I will call Angie. She is one of the leaders, one of the 'downest' cholas, despite her diminutiveness. Babygirl says that one of the reasons that Angie is able to be a leader is because she has a really big attitude which compensates for her smallness. In other words, she wears really long eyeliner and is willing to get in a fight with anyone who'll take her up.

Angie is half Euro-American and half Mexican. Her father is Mexican, divorced from her mother when she was a toddler, so that Angie has always lived with her mom. She lives in a superbly wealthy part of town, in a huge, sprawling house with her mom and her stepfather, both of whom are white. All of her kin networks are homogeneously European-American. Although it is not the point of the discussion here to speculate why Angie became a chola, or why her friendship networks are almost exclusively Latina and African-American, it is interesting to note that Angie is a native speaker of both Chicano English and of the matrix Euro-American Standard English dialect. Angie styleshifts at will between the two personae. More interestingly, however, she sometimes uses her matrix dialect resources in the service of chola purposes. She sometimes calls the principal's office and excuses herself and her chola friends from school absences in the flawless California Euro-



American dialect that she has been speaking from birth. Her homegirls giggle in the background as the play succeeds.

Is Angie in drag as a chola who is in drag as a white person? Or the opposite? Angie's many distinct styles are irreducible to impersonations of abstract idealizations. The styles are in practice, in performance. It is an inalienable part of Angie's persona as a chola that she has resources, linguistic and otherwise, which the community finds useful at various times, and which she enlists to fulfill the aims of the cholas. She is one of the many possible characters in the daily theater of the articulation of Latina identity. So as you now finish reading this paper, the cholas hold secret meetings in a mansion in Foxbury, and then walk to the park and take pictures, or cruise in their lowriders, chasing boys off their territory.

### Notes

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- 1. For interesting perspectives on the criminalization of children and adolescents in Northern California see Hinckle 1995 and Siegal 1995.
- 2. I have used pseudonyms throughout to preserve the anonymity of the community, the school, and the individuals to whom I refer.
- 3. A broad review of feminist and other philosophical perspectives on the body can be found in the introductory chapter of Grosz 1994.
- 4. *San José Mercury News*, March 17, 1996.
- 5. Reserve Officer Training Corps, a branch of the U. S. Army that extends its recruitment program into the high school and college level.
- 6. I will henceforth adopt the feminine gender in Spanish as the generic, both because my study deals almost exclusively with girls and for stylistic simplicity.
- 7. Many parents needlessly worry that their children might be endangered by wearing a specific color to school. I try to assuage parents' fears by telling them that if their children do not participate in the symbolic system of gang membership to begin with, then wearing a red jacket, for instance, will not put them in danger (although this often appears to be the diagnostic for gang membership that school administrators and the police apply). In order to be 'mistaken' for a gang member by other members, their child would have to follow highly stylized rules of speech, hair, makeup, style of clothing, and even have a certain gait, in which case there wouldn't be much of a 'mistake.' Since the colors are only secondary characteristics, this is also why certain schools' policies of adopting school uniforms to combat gang membership make very little sense. The social structure always already underlies the symbolic system, so any element, even within the confines of a uniform, can be turned into a symbolic marker, and these will shift within the community of members faster than parents or the police can ever track them.

8. After the completion of my study, the Raiders moved to Oakland in a flurry of publicity. As far as I can tell, their move to Northern California has not affected their place in the symbolic system.
9. *Fresa* is a Mexican Spanish vernacular term for a young person from the urban, middle-class, predominantly European-descent elite.
10. A largely Chicana/o civil rights and labor movement of the 1960s spearheaded by the late César Chavez.
11. Throughout the duration of my fieldwork I was perceived as both similar to (Latina, female, relatively young) and different from (non-gang member, researcher) the girls. Nevertheless, I was often held to their aesthetic norms. The one time I got a relatively short haircut (a chin-length bob) during my fieldwork, both Norteñas and Sureñas objected strenuously, making it clear that for this particular group of Latinas long hair is *de rigueur*: 'You look Chinese!' was the comment I received from both Norteñas and Sureñas.
12. 'Throwing a number' refers to the display of a handshape indicating a symbolic gang numeral. Thus, if one person throws a one and the other one a four, it displays '14', the Norteñas' symbolic number.

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