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Mona AKA Sad Girl: A multilingual multimodal critical discourse analysis of music videos of a Japanese Chicana rap artist

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ABSTRACT

Sociolinguistic studies on the globalization of hip hop have focused on multilingual lyrics as emblematic of superdiversity and hybrid identity, but the multimodal turn in sociolinguistics suggests the need to consider how lyrics interact with musical and visual features. Drawing on studies of music videos, TV ads, and film in cultural and media studies and multimodal studies, this paper examines an under-researched area of hip hop, the global spread of Chicano rap, by conducting a multilingual, multimodal critical discourse analysis of several videos by Mona AKA Sad Girl, a Japanese rapper whose lyrics switch between Japanese, Spanish, and English. This genre-based study looks at how the artist constructs a feminist glocal identity through a combination of song lyrics, musical style, cultural iconography, body decoration, gesture and film techniques that localize the oppositional super-vernacular of Chicano rap while challenging discourses of patriarchy and nationalism. The study also takes into account data from an interview with the artist and social media to gain insights into issues of authenticity and cultural appropriation.

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1. Introduction

Since its emergence in the 1970s in the Bronx, New York, hip hop has become a worldwide phenomenon that is particularly rich in affordances for the scholarly study of language, culture, identity and ideology. As a global youth culture with four components (i.e., rapping, DJing, break-dancing, and graffiti), the globalization of hip hop is characterized by “multicultural syncretism” that results from “cross-cultural interaction synthesizing the global with the local” in a process of ‘glocalization’ (Drissel, 2009, p. 122). A growing body of sociolinguistic studies on the globalization of hip hop focuses on multilingual lyrics as emblematic of superdiversity (Blommaert and Rampton, 2011) and hybrid identities (e.g., Higgins, 2009; Pennycook, 2003, 2007; Sarkar and Winer, 2006). One aspect of hip hop that is largely absent in the research, however, is the global spread of Chicano rap, a subgenre of hip hop, which, while sharing much in common with hip hop, has its origins among Mexican Americans on the West Coast, and has its own unique features, including lyrics that mix Spanish and English, Spanglish and *caló*¹ and visual iconography that indexes Chicano

nationalism and *Mexicanidad*² (McFarland, 2008, 2013; Pérez-Torres, 2006). One of the countries where Chicano rap has developed a strong presence is Japan; yet, while the spread of hip hop to Japan has been the subject of several much-cited studies (notably Condry, 2001, 2006; Cornyetz, 1994; Pennycook, 2003, 2007), little scholarly attention has been devoted to the study of Japanese artists who perform Chicano rap in Japan.

In this paper, I examine the case of Mona AKA Sad Girl, a Japanese rapper who performs in a Chicano rap style mixing not only English with Japanese but also Spanish and *caló*, and Chicana/o iconography and *Chola*³ style with Japanese contexts. The study focuses on an analysis of several of Mona’s music videos including a focus on song lyrics, visual imagery and film techniques in the videos. Secondary data comes from comments about the videos on social media (YouTube videos, blogs, and Facebook), articles published online about the artist, and a Skype interview on May 4, 2016 and follow-up email communication conducted by the author with the artist in the month of November 2016). This study analyzes ways in which Mona’s body of videos express how her hybrid iden-

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¹ Sociologist Rosaura Sánchez (1983) describes *caló* as a highly creative, urban code originating among pachucos in the 1940s that is “a synthesis of the different varieties spoken by Chicanos in the Southwest, . . . incorporat[ing] standard Spanish, popular Spanish varieties, loanwords from English and . . . code-switching” (p. 128). *Caló* has become elevated to a literary code in poetry, novels, and film (p. 134). Kid Frost was first to incorporate *caló* in Chicano rap lyrics (McFarland, 2008).

² *Mexicanidad* or “Mexicanness” is a term whose meaning has shifted over time and depending on the context. While its roots can be traced to the Mexican Revolution and the creation of a mythical national past that privileges indigenous identity, Chicano rap is a reflection of the “polycultural nature of twenty-first century Mexicanidad” (McFarland, 2013, p. 82).

³ Cholas are “gang-identified girls” (Mendoza-Denton, 2008) typically of Mexican descent, related to the “pachucas” of the 1940s; also referred to as “homegirls” (see Fregoso, 1995).

tity is negotiated and conveyed through her use of the interplay of several semiotic modes. In addition, I focus on how Mona has both adopted and adapted the language and other semiotic symbols and themes associated with the Chicano rap genre to the local Japanese context. I also explore what Mona's videos reveal about how the artist expresses her authenticity as a global Chicana rapper which sheds light on on-going controversies and debates about hip hop (e.g., cultural appropriation, authenticity, violence, and representations of women). Finally, in adopting a combined sociolinguistic and multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA), this inquiry considers what the use of linguistic, visual, and musical features reveals about underlying ideological issues, specifically regarding competing discourses of Chicano nationalism and Chicana feminism (Anzaldúa, 1987/2012) and Japanese homogeneity vs. multiculturalism, and monolingualism vs. multilingualism (Heinrich, 2012; Ko, 2010).

2. Background

2.1. Globalization of Chicano rap and lowrider culture

To understand the growing popularity of Chicano rap in Japan, it must be seen as part of the broader phenomenon of lowrider culture worldwide.⁴ Chicano rap's strong connection to lowrider culture originated in Southwestern U.S. and the spread of both has gone hand-in-hand to the rest of the U.S. and other countries through lowrider shows that typically feature concerts in which participants dress in Chola/o-style clothing reminiscent of the origins of lowrider culture in the Pachuca/o era of the 1940s. Films such as *Boulevard Nights* (1979, dir. Presserman) and *Mi Vida Loca/My Crazy Life* (1993, dir. Allis Anders) have had a strong influence on the spread of not only lowrider culture but also Chola/o fashion and Chicano rap music in countries such as Canada, England, Brazil, Spain, New Zealand, Taiwan, Thailand, and Japan ("Latinos in Taiwan," 2009; Rivera, 2014; Romero, 2013; Sandoval, 2003; Tatum, 2011). In Japan (as in Europe), the emergence of lowrider culture is also closely connected to the presence of Mexican American soldiers in the U.S. military serving in Japan (Sandoval, 2003; Tatum, 2011). *Lowrider Magazine*, which sponsored its first Super Show in Osaka in 1993, and its subsequent Japanese edition, also led to a growing interest in Chola/o fashion, Chicano rap music and Chicano culture (Rivera, 2014; Rodríguez, 2014; Tatum, 2011). Japan has become an important market for Chicano rappers from the U.S., many of whom regularly perform there at concerts and car shows and collaborate with the growing number of Japanese artists who perform Chicano rap, such as Mona AKA Sad Girl.

2.2. Mona AKA Sad Girl

One of the most visible Japanese rappers who perform in the Chicano rap style is female rap artist, Mona AKA Sad Girl, who is from Kyoto and takes her name from the main character of the film, *Mi Vida Loca/My Crazy Life*, about girl gangs in East Los Angeles (LA). She began performing at lowrider car shows in 2006 and has since released five albums and produced numerous music videos which feature Mona dressed in Chola style, lowrider cars and other symbols of Chicano culture. While her main audience is Japanese lowriders, in particular females, Mona's fanbase is expanding worldwide, through face-to-face encounters at lowrider events and concerts and through the internet, as her videos circulate on social media and other websites. Numerous online articles and

blog posts about the global spread of lowrider and Chola/o subculture and Chicano rap mention Mona, show images of her on album covers, and embed or link to her videos, reflecting the growing attention she is receiving both within and beyond Japan (e.g., Batanero, 2013; Martínez, 2014; Moreno, 2012; Porzucki, 2013; Romero, 2013; San Roman, 2011). These articles show that Mona is known as much for her adoption/adaptation of the musical style of Chicano rappers and her ability to rhyme and rap in Japanese, English and Spanish as for her Chola-style clothing, make-up, and hairstyles. Comments on her videos reflect both positive and negative or mixed reactions evoking both feelings of ethnic pride and concerns about cultural appropriation.

While Chicano rap in Japan, and particularly Mona AKA Sad Girl, has gained the attention of music fans and journalists, no known academic study of global Chicano rap or Mona or her work exists, though a recent master's thesis by Jiménez (2016) analyzes artwork by Chicano artist Rio Yañez that remixes Mona's album cover images. Mona is also mentioned in an online student publication and blog that discuss how Chola identity has been appropriated by non-Chicanos in the U.S. and abroad (Batanero, 2013; Davolos, 2015). These critical discussions further confirm the value of analyzing Mona's work in light of the cross-cultural identity implications of the global spread of Chicano rap.

3. Relevant research

The analysis of how Mona AKA Sad Girl negotiates and conveys her global hybrid identity in her music videos requires an interdisciplinary approach that draws on a combination of methodologies from three main disciplines: cultural and media studies, sociolinguistics of globalization, and multimodal studies. These areas of study share an underlying focus on semiotics and critical discourse analysis (CDA). Additional areas of research that inform this study include linguistic anthropology, film studies, and genre-related studies of Chicano rap and hip hop.

3.1. Cultural (and media) studies approaches to music video analysis

Considerable research has been devoted to music videos from a cultural studies and media studies perspective contributing to an understanding of the multilayered meanings of music videos from the viewpoint of gender representation, race and ethnicity. Pioneering studies of MTV and music video, drawing on film studies and semiological analysis, focused on how music videos are unique in their use of intertextuality and pastiche (e.g., Frith, Goodwin, and Grossberg, 1993; Goodwin, 1992). Early studies that examined music video from a feminist perspective include the work of Kaplan (1987) who expressed concerns that music videos are inevitably disparaging to women and Lewis (1990) who challenged Kaplan's and others' critique of MTV as presenting only negative and sexist images of women. Lewis' (1990, 1993) much-cited studies on female address in music videos by four female 1980s rock musicians led to a reinterpretation of how women are portrayed in music videos, particularly their re-appropriation of the street as a central meaning system (p. 112). More recent scholarship expands the feminist analysis to include an examination of how gender intersects with race, ethnicity, and power by focusing on the role of dance, gesture, gaze, and bilingualism in indexing discourses of hybrid identity, transnationalism, and sexuality (e.g., Cepeda, 2010; Durham, 2012; Raitlon and Watson, 2011). Though recent studies offer an increasingly detailed-oriented look at how the music-visual-lyrics connection relates to larger discourses of race, gender, and sexuality (e.g., Vernallis, 2004), a cultural studies approach to music video analysis tends to lack a systematic focus on meaning making that can account for the

⁴ Studies have analyzed the significance of lowrider culture from various perspectives, e.g., Chavoya (2004) who looks at the customization of lowrider cars as a hybrid art and examines the impact of Chicano lowrider practices and aesthetics on U.S. American public culture. For an overview of the research on lowriders, see Chappell (2012).

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