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respect yourself, protect yourself: Latina girls and sexual identity

Lorena Garcia, New York University Press, New York, 2012, 218pp., ISBN: 978-0814733172, \$24 (Pbk); ISBN: 978-0814733165, \$75 (Hbk)

Public policies persistently portray minority girls, such as Latina and black girls, as an 'at-risk' population in need of intervention for teenage pregnancy. Minority girls are often represented as hypersexual, with the highest rate of teenage pregnancy. Few studies examine minority girls' views of sexuality. Lorena Garcia bridges this gap by exploring Latina girls' sexual agency and their negotiations of sexual identity. Her ethnographic work contributes to our understanding of their subjectivities.

Garcia spent two years doing fieldwork in Mexican and Puerto Rican communities in Chicago. She interviewed twenty Mexican and twenty Puerto Rican girls, eight of whom self-identified as lesbians. All except one are second-generation Latinas. In addition, she interviewed eighteen mothers, including ten Mexican and eight Puerto Rican women. All participants were recruited through community organisations. She first presents the larger context that frames their understanding of sex, including communications between daughters and mothers, as well as sex (mis)education at schools. She then discusses how these girls define their sexual identity through reshaping the cultural meaning of 'sexual respectability' and how they negotiate safe sex with their partners. The data from in-depth interviews and participant observation enrich her portrayal of their sexuality.

Garcia points out that these girls deconstruct their racialised sexual image of hypersexuality and stress the importance of 'sexual respectability'. However, for them, sexual respectability is not about maintaining the culturally defined 'virginity'. Sexual respectability means taking control of their sexual behaviours to prevent pregnancy. These girls thus display sexual agency through redefining sexual respectability.

This redefinition is not without contradictions though. It simultaneously reinforces the good girl/bad girl dichotomy. For example, Latina girls compare themselves with pregnant girls, whom they perceive as sexually irresponsible. They also compare themselves with other groups. They view white girls as sexually promiscuous. Furthermore, Mexican and Puerto Rican mothers and girls criticise the other group. Mexican mothers criticise Puerto Rican mothers for

not being strict enough. Mexican girls criticise Puerto Rican girls for not being sexually responsible. Finally, they reiterate the common perception of black girls as hypersexual. Instead of deconstructing the dichotomy, these comparisons reinforce the racialised sexual images of the 'other'.

Another important point is how their boyfriends' sense of masculinity poses challenges to their sexual agency. While these girls emphasise self-protection and insist on using condoms, their boyfriends view their request as a compromise of their manhood. Their request is often interpreted as doubting their boyfriends' sexual knowledge or fidelity. They also face the sexual double standard. Virginity, a form of capital for marriage, is important to proper womanhood while young men's sexual prowess is deemed a symbol of manhood. These girls thus struggle to resist this gender inequality when asserting their sexual agency.

Existing research on teenage sexuality usually focuses on heterosexual girls, thus ignoring lesbian and bisexual girls' experiences. Garcia includes lesbian and bisexual girls in her project and compares their experiences with those of heterosexual girls. Lesbian and bisexual girls' sexual transgression brings shame to their families. Being a lesbian brings shame to these girls' families. In Latino culture, there is the concept of family honour, which means you don't destroy the reputation of the family. One insight she provides is the different comfort levels with regard to pleasure and desire between these two groups of girls. While heterosexual girls are afraid to discuss pleasure and desire with their friends for fear of being perceived as sexually inappropriate, lesbian and bisexual girls have fewer reservations about expressing their desire. This indicates both progress and *status quo*. While heterosexual girls assert their sexual agency, they continue to conform to bounded femininity.

One major drawback is the lack of an in-depth discussion on the term Latino/a. As many scholars have pointed out, Latino/a is a complex term. This term, with its historical roots in the social movements of the 1970s, is useful for alliance-building among people of Latin American descent. However, it encompasses many national/racial/ethnic groups and thus conflates their historical, political and socio-cultural differences. Lumping different groups in one category, while convenient for certain purposes, can further invisibilise and essentialise each group. It is surprising that Garcia fails to deconstruct the term with a thorough analysis. In subsuming both Mexican and Puerto Rican girls under the term Latina, she seems to assume that these two groups' cultural systems of gender and sexuality are the same. This reinforces the idea that Latinos/Latinas are a homogeneous group. While this book depicts a complex picture of 'Latina' girls, the author's failure to deconstruct the term 'Latino/a' is a major omission.

Overall, this is an excellent book. Garcia's writing style is accessible to both academic scholars and the general public. The book adds necessary knowledge to gender and sexuality studies on Latina or minority girls' sexual agency and identity.

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