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Reseña de "Latina Girls: Voices of Adolescent Strength in the United States" de Jill Denner y Bianca Guzman (eds.)
The City University of New York
New York, Estados Unidos

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Denner and Gurman’s co-edited volume, *Latina Girls: Voices of Adolescent Strength in the United States* intends to challenge dominant negative stereotypes of Latina girls—as girls who “make poor choices and who will likely drop out of school, become a teenage mother, or be the girlfriend of a gang member” (p. 1)—by identifying the personal and social resources that Latina girls bring to discussions of “strength” and resilience. Emphasizing the fact that Latina girls now constitute the largest minority group of girls in the U.S., the book claims that “these young women have a unique opportunity to incorporate their cultural traditions with mainstream U.S. dominant culture” (pp. 2–3).

The co-edited volume is organized around four “developmental processes” that the editors claim are “essential for Latina girls to thrive during adolescence” (p. 8). There are: negotiating family relationships, overcoming institutional barriers, accessing institutional support, and developing initiative. The first section of the book consists of four chapters: Los Papas, La Familia y La Sexualidad (17–28); Confianza, Consejos, and Contradictions (pp. 29–43); La Casa: Negotiating Family Cultural Practices, Constructing Identities (pp. 44–58); and Promoting Values of Education in Latino Mother-Adolescent Discussions about Conflict and Sexuality (pp. 59–76). These chapters tend to focus on how girls negotiate gender roles within their families. A key strength of this set of chapters (and this is also true of the entire book) is that girls are presented as agents in their own socialization, rather than as passive subjects. Nevertheless, the chapters operate under the assumption of a “traditional Latino family” and fail to consider alternative household configurations or kinship networks.

The second section of the book, probably the strongest section, also consists of four chapters: Resistance to Race and Gender Oppression: Dominican High School Girls in New York City (pp. 79–92); La Escuela: Young Latina Women Negotiating Identities in School (93–108); Latina Adolescents’ Career Goals: Resources for overcoming Obstacles (109–22); and Career Expectations and Goals of Latina Adolescents: Results from a Nationwide Survey (123–37). Together these chapters focus on how Latina girls match their professional aspirations to the institutional offerings (or lack thereof) of the educational systems they encounter. Collectively, these chapters, particularly the one by Nancy López, tend to provide greater context and a more nuanced analysis of the everyday educational and community commitments of Latina girls.

The chapters of the third section—Latina Adolescents’ Sexual Health: A Participatory Empowerment Approach (141–56); ‘Cien Porciento Puertorriqueña (Puerto Rican, 100 Percent) (157–67); and Getting Connected: The Expanding Use of Technology among Latina Girls (168–84)—seem more loosely connected than those in the other three sections. The common theme that weaves these chapters together could be the structured sources of support that Latino girls receive. The strategies examined in this section focus on “cultural literacy,” built on the assumption that the self-awareness that girls gain
from learning more about their “cultural identity” serves as a source of strength that could propel them to forge professional or educational aspirations.

The last section of the co-edited volume consists of the following chapters: La Felicidad: Predictors of Life Satisfaction and Well-Being among Latina Girls (187–98); La Salud: Latina Adolescents Constructing Identities, Negotiating Health Decisions (199–211); Latina Adolescent Motherhood: A Turning Point? (212–25); and Conclusion: Latina Girls, Social Science and Transformation (226–37). These writings continue to examine how girls interpret social expectations and individual desires or aspirations.

As is generally the case with edited volumes, the chapters in this book vary in theoretical depth, methodological approach, overall quality, and intended audience. Some of the chapters read as the conclusion of program-evaluation research and describe specific program implementation and their outcomes (the chapters by Guzman/Arruda/Feria and Harper/Bangi/Sanchez/Doll/Pedraza), whereas others relied on quantitative or qualitative surveys (Rivera/Gallimore, Marlino/Wilson, Fairlie/London, Thakral/Vera), ethnographic methodologies (Gallegos-Castillo, Romo/Kouyoumdjian/Nadeem/Sigman, Lopez, Hyams, Flores, Russell/Lee), and the use of a more literary style to supplement identity-formation strategies among Latina girls and sometimes their mothers (Ayala and Reyes). As a whole, the book, in its overall celebratory tone, might be useful for practitioners who are beginning to work with Latino girls, including school counselors, staff of not-for-profit organizations, or after-school programs. The book is less successful as an academic volume that contributes to a nuanced understanding of the lives of “Latina girls” (not sure this very term means much without an adequate examination of the heterogeneity of what “Latina/o” means to begin with).

Save for a few exceptional chapters, including those by Nancy Lopez, Melissa Hyams, Mimi Doll/Ana Pedraza, and Robert Fairlie/London, many of the chapters in this edited volume, including the Introduction, unfortunately lack a sufficient engagement with the social science literature outside of psychology and mental health. Even in the brief “literature review” in the Introduction, for instance, nothing is mentioned Ruth Horowitz’s groundbreaking work on Mexican-American adolescent girls (Honor and the American Dream), including her work on the role of family, community, school, and career goal-setting, or the work of other leading scholars who have examined issues of “resilience” among Mexican-American girls in Chicago. Coincidentally, neither is Horowitz’s study of how first-time motherhood does serve as goal-setting for many teenage girls cited in the piece by Russell and Lee, which arrived at a similar finding for Latinas. Many of the conclusions at which the various chapters arrive regarding sex education, educational aspirations, family burdens, etc., would have benefited tremendously from engaging in dialogue with other comparable research done among other racial minority women, including African Americans and Asians (Yen Espiritu’s work on Filipina girls is an example). Likewise, many chapters required a greater examination of the political economy and historical particularities that frame the specific arguments put forth.

A goal of the book purportedly is to challenge “cultural deficiency” models that have dominated developmental psychology. In fact “culture,” though never really defined, is a central tenet of most of the authors’ analyses. Unfortunately, static concepts like “Latino culture” or “Latino values” are presented as fixed categories that continue to reify stereotypes of a heterogeneous population.
(e.g., “La familia, the family, is the primary socializing agent for all family members.... For Latinos, familismo...is considered one of the most important culture-specific values,” p. 45). Perhaps this is the main weakness of many of the chapters in this laudable collaborative volume. In its effort to celebrate Latina girls, the book tends to substitute static negative models (e.g., high school dropouts, pregnant teens) for positive but equally static views of Latina “empowerment,” a concept that, incidentally, is never really deconstructed. Except for a brief disclaimer in the introduction, most chapters lack a nuanced analysis of issues concerning differences of class background, race, nationality, geographical context, or migrant versus U.S.-born generations.

The book is presented as a counterbalance to traditional mental health literature that has been historically biased toward “cultural deficiency” models. This is an admirable goal. Nevertheless, the strategy which the editors adopt (and which they insist their contributors adopt as well, as the editors themselves state) tends to be one of uncritical celebration of Latina girls’ “resilience,” “empowerment,” and “strength.” It seems as if the girls whose voices appear in this volume are entirely unrelated or unaffected by those who do get pregnant, might be in gangs, or drop out of school, rather than as part of the same political economy that tends to subordinate women and racial minorities and of which these situations are symptomatic. Couldn’t we assume that “girls in gangs” also “care about school” or that diligent girls who do well in school may not like their families? Can we envision scenarios that capture the complexity of human experience without having to use broad brushes to characterize, or even defend, the living conditions of individual girls? As an inspirational project, the book meets its goals, by suspending a more multifaceted examination of the complexity that is likely to characterize all girls’ lives. Perhaps it would have been helpful if the co-editors had explored the possibility that any developmental model that draws upon “culture” as a determinant of difference might be inherently flawed, no matter whether the views of concepts like “marianismo” are seen as detrimental or empowering.

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Puerto Rican Poetry, An Anthology from Aboriginal to Contemporary Times
Edited and Translated by Roberto Márquez
Amherst/Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007
490 pages; $28.95 [paper]
REVIEWER: Alan West-Durán, Northeastern University

According to the author, this excellent anthology of Puerto Rican poetry grew out of the need to have an English-language edition for classroom use of the island’s poetry that was comprehensive by encompassing the country’s entire history. Previous work has focused on the 20th century, or Nuyorican poetry, exclusively island-based poets, or of boricua poets in New York, as in Pedro López Adorno’s anthology of 1991. Marquez’s anthology is ambitious because it covers everything over half a millennium, with close to seventy known authors, more than two hundred poems, mini-biographical essays, a detailed chronology, and a short but useful bibliography.

Márquez divides the anthology into four books: the first is “Before and After Columbus,” which covers from 1400–1820; and the second is called “The Creole Matrix: Notions of Nation,” which concerns the years 1821 to 1950. Books Three