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## Respect Yourself, Protect Yourself: Latina Girls and Sexual Identity

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## *Respect Yourself, Protect Yourself: Latina Girls and Sexual Identity*

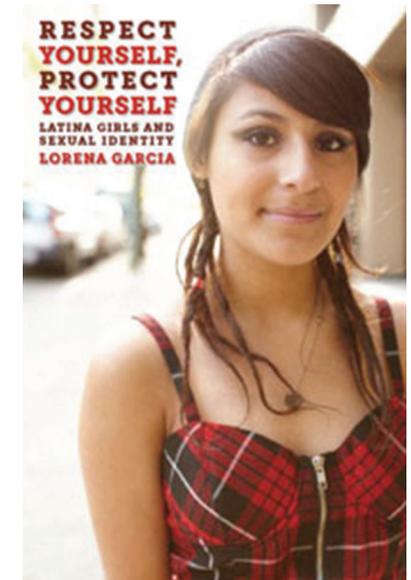
Lorena Garcia

NYU Press, 2012. 219 pp.  
ISBN 9780814733172. \$24.00

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Sociologist Lorena Garcia's transdisciplinary book, *Respect Yourself, Protect Yourself: Latina Girls and Sexuality*, considers the ways in which Latina youth gain sexual literacy in cultural and community contexts that construct youth sexuality, particularly Latina/o youth sexuality, as risky, crisis-inducing behavior. Through intersectional analysis of interviews with self-identified sexually active Latina young women and their mothers, Garcia moves us beyond pathologizing stereotypes of Latinas and Latina/o culture to a broader understanding of Latina sexuality—one that makes young Latinas legible to readers as youth who are making meaning of their sexual practices and choices as well as their lives.

In this book, Garcia draws attention to the fact that we often want young people to “practice safe sex,” but we do not often consider the challenges and constraints that they (particularly young women) must negotiate to do so. In response, Garcia presents findings from participant observations and two years of in-depth interviews with 40 second-generation Mexican and Puerto Rican young women, as well as 18 mothers, living in working-class areas of Chicago. Garcia finds that Latina girls value safe sex as a practice that leads to sexual respectability and a brighter future, but they face many challenges to practicing safe sex, such as family restrictions on time outside of the home and sex education classes that reinforce racial and gender stereotypes rather than teach safe sex practices. Applying an intersectional framework that refuses to generalize about “Latina/o culture,” Garcia's analysis engenders insights not only into how young Latinas understand their sexuality, but also into what shapes that understanding: their mother's messages, cultural discourses about race, gender, class, and age, and structural constraints. She approaches mothers and daughters as cultural actors making conflicted choices that, at once, resist certain stereotypes and power relations and, at the same time, support gendered and sexualized hierarchies.



The book is organized into six chapters, each opening with engaging vignettes that reflect Garcia's observations in the community. In chapter one, aptly titled "Studying the 'Other' Girls," Garcia outlines the purpose of the book: to challenge one-dimensional views of young Latinas as always only "at risk" for pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases, or as part of a "crisis" of unprotected, promiscuous youth. Garcia shifts attention from youth sexuality as a "problem" (which, she argues, also tends to focus on the actions of girls, particularly women of color) toward considerations of how young Latinas understand and practice safe sex and sexual pleasure. Drawing on feminist, race/ethnic, and queer studies, as well as scholarship from sociology and history, Garcia articulates an intersectional theoretical framework that considers "intersecting or interlocking relationships that link social formations such as race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and age" (8). She then describes her ethnographic method, highlighting her efforts to acknowledge and value her participants' knowledges and needs. One particularly beautiful section of this chapter considers Garcia's insider/outsider role as a community researcher. Drawing on the work of Nancy Naples, Garcia considers how her position as a second-generation young Latina from the Chicago area shaped her interactions with her similarly positioned participants.

Chapters two and three consider the impact of the social institutions often charged with the responsibility of teaching young women about sexual health: family (read: mothers) and school. In chapter two, "'She's Old School Like That': Mother and Daughter Sex Talks," Garcia explores how first-generation Mexican and Puerto Rican mothers respond to the discovery of their daughters' sexual activity, and what daughters think about these responses. Garcia helps readers understand how mothers shape the sexual knowledge and experiences of Latina young women, while being careful not to homogenize Latinidad by consistently drawing attention to differences based on the daughters' sexual orientation and the family's ethnic background. Since racial and gendered scripts construct mothers as "good" or "bad" depending on their daughters' sexual behaviors and outcomes, Garcia argues that there is much at stake for Latina mothers when their daughters are sexually active. Participants' stories demonstrate that Latina mothers actively respond to their daughters' sexuality by communicating to them the importance of "respecting" oneself enough to practice safe sex, by sharing their own experiences to emphasize that sexual activity can make young women more vulnerable to gender and racial inequalities that Latinas already face, and by requesting that family members or female friends also talk to their daughters about sex. This chapter challenges assumptions that Latina mothers are silent on the subject of sexuality by showing how "they engage and rework meanings of gender and sexuality" in responding to their daughters' sexuality.

In chapter three, "The Sexual (Mis)Education of Latina Girls," Garcia presents what young Latina women think of the sex education they received in middle school. Garcia continues to frame Latinas as knowledge- and information-seekers by showing that young Latinas find sex education lacking in providing relevant or useful information to help them negotiate their sexuality. Garcia's participants offer explicit examples of teachers privileging heterosexuality, reinforcing good girl/ bad girl dichotomies, silencing students' questions, and operating from taken-for-granted assumptions of Latinas as destined to become pregnant. Garcia closes this chapter

by considering how and why Latina girls in her ethnography seemed to want to do things the "right way"—postponing pregnancy until after they establish a career and household, for instance—in order to challenge stereotypes about Latinas and to benefit their families who did not have similar opportunities in Mexico or Puerto Rico. Encouraged by sex education discourses and broader neoliberal messages, Latina young women seek knowledge about safe sex in order to defy stereotypes and achieve success.

Chapters four and five focus on how Latina young women define and practice safe sex, while also offering some insights into how they discuss (or do not discuss) pleasure. In chapter four, "'Handlin' Your Business': Sexual Respectability and Peers," Garcia shows how many of her participants emphasized the importance of "handlin' your business," or using safe sex practices to "avoid pregnancy and STDs" (84). Garcia observed young women sharing information about sexual health and helping each other access necessary resources. By demonstrating "sexual respectability" through safe sex practices, Latina young women believed they could sustain a social status as good, sexually responsible young women. In other words, participants avoided the "bad girl" label of a sexually active girl by being a sexually responsible girl. Although Garcia finds that her participants resist discourses that would deny them the right to enjoy or engage in sexual activity, she points out that young Latinas still form their sexual subjectivity by distinguishing themselves from "bad" girls they see as irresponsible—like young mothers, or young women who seem promiscuous. This continued good/bad dichotomy made it difficult for heterosexual young women to openly discuss pleasure with friends or partners, although Garcia finds that young lesbian women seemed more comfortable doing so.

In chapter five, Garcia shares participants' stories of negotiating safe sex with partners who often resisted open discussions of sexual safety because they saw them as irrelevant—young heterosexual men believing that, because they are loyal, their partners should trust them, and young lesbian women resisting such conversations because there is less emphasis on lesbian women as "at risk" for negative outcomes. This chapter demonstrates how Latina young women creatively tap into cultural discourses of masculinity and femininity, as well as media depictions of negative outcomes of sex, to initiate productive discussions, and ensure that their partners practice safe sex. However, this chapter again highlights how young heterosexual Latina women feel uncomfortable in openly discussing sexual pleasure with partners.

In the conclusion, Garcia synthesizes her findings and points to practical implications. She writes, "As I listened to the girls' stories about their sex education, I could not help wondering what their sex education experiences would have been like had they had been given an opportunity to share with the adults making sex decisions for them what they felt they needed to learn" (156). Garcia calls us to get over the discomfort we feel about young women having sexual intercourse and, instead, to draw on these young women's experiences and sex-related questions to design accessible and applicable sex education.

While Latina youth are all too often marked by deficit and deficiency, Garcia's book represents young Latinas as intelligent and thoughtful seekers of knowledge and information. This approach makes the book one that could easily accompany other

texts working toward asset-driven approaches to non-dominant communities and their particular literacies.

While the book resists many other stereotypes about young Latinas, it does not challenge pathologized representations of young motherhood. A fuller explanation of Garcia's decision not to include pregnant or mothering young Latinas in her inquiry into understandings and practices of sexual safety and pleasure (perhaps reflecting her need to delimit the parameters of the study), could have helped Garcia distinguish the absence of young mothers' perspectives in her book from ongoing efforts to construct young mothers as always and only examples of women who failed to practice safe sex.

The strengths of this book, however, far outweigh any weaknesses. For community literacy researchers and those involved in relevant community/ academic collaborations, this book demonstrates the value of researching all kinds of literacy, even sexual literacy, as ways of knowing, being, and doing that are community-informed and important for improving approaches to education. Garcia's interviews highlight the fact that knowledge about sexuality, gender, race, and inequality is exchanged through literacy practices such as family *testimonios*, health websites, community organizations, peer interactions, media, and partner negotiations.

In addition, since Garcia situates her study as part of work that considers sexuality and gender as socially constructed, and always sites of struggle, this book is especially relevant for Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies classrooms. Garcia's intersectional analysis is brilliant as she always considers how patterns in mothers' and daughters' responses and actions reflect larger cultural discourses about women, motherhood, sexuality, race, or class. She is careful not to homogenize Latinas. She also carefully deliberates the complex, and sometimes contradictory, ways in which certain responses resist stereotypes or specifically gendered/raced performances while bolstering instantiations of patriarchy or heteronormativity.

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