



**Chicana Adolescents: Bitches, 'Ho's, and Schoolgirls.** Lisa C. Dietrich. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998. 178 pp.

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Among the larger ethnic groups in the United States, young people of Mexican descent are overall the least likely to graduate from high school and the least likely to enroll in and complete four-year college degree programs. Because of their numbers, the poor academic attainment of Mexican youth—both immigrant and U.S. born—is a pressing national problem. Surprisingly, however, we have few detailed ethnographic accounts of the school and community experiences of Mexican youth. Even fewer center specifically on the lives of young Mexican women.

*Chicana Adolescents* helps fill this void. The book focuses on a group of adolescent working-class Chicana girls, all of whom have left school or are at risk of dropping out. In describing the day-to-day experiences of these girls, Lisa Dietrich shows us how their life choices and seemingly self-defeating behaviors are shaped by the structural and material realities of their barrio lives. The interplay among political, social, economic, and cultural factors complicates the girls' transition into womanhood and constrains as well as shapes their life trajectories. Additionally, sexism, and more specifically the ways in which their sexuality is under constant surveillance from each other, their boyfriends, fathers, and brothers, decreases their sense of power and self-determination. For example, the labels "bitch," "schoolgirl," and "ho" are used by both boys and girls to restrict the girls' behavior, and the girls themselves lack the cultural resources to contest them. Thus, these girls may choose to get pregnant, leave school, or join gangs because these activities will bring them a certain degree of status, prestige, and love even as they propel the girls into cycles of dependence. Nonetheless, in a world in which opportunities for academic and economic success are severely limited, the girls' choices and behaviors provide them some control over their daily lives.

The study draws from two years of field research in a Mexican neighborhood in Southern California. Dietrich gained entrée into the community and into gang-affiliated and non-gang-affiliated peer groups via the school, by offering her services there as a tutor and eventually by providing other types of out-of-school assistance to the girls, most notably by providing them with transportation to parties and other social events. Dietrich notes that her acceptance by the girls was often met with



caution and suspicion, but over time she gained the trust of a core group of seven, who became her primary informants. All seven had some connection to the local gang, and two were gang affiliated. All seven were U.S. born. All preferred to speak in English most of the time.

Dietrich's analysis centers around the cultural values of *femenidad* and *machismo* and the ways in which these values in interaction with the material realities of the girls' lives shape their behavior. She also points to the shortcomings of explaining the girls' values and behaviors through either a "culture of poverty" framework or an oppositional youth culture framework. Rather, she finds the girls in her study to be "cultural pragmatists."

Dietrich provides a separate chapter on Chicanas and schooling in which she shows how the girls' peer culture undermines their success in school. Most of the girls find the academic aspects of school both boring and irrelevant to their lives, although they embrace the social aspects. Like Signithia Fordham ("Racelessness as a Factor in Black Students' School Success," *Harvard Educational Review* 58[1]:54–84), Dietrich suggests that the girls in her study equate academic success with "acting white" and with denial of their identity, culture, and heritage. She notes, too, that "homegirls" do not view educational success as a way to empower themselves, that they risk alienation from their peers if they act like "schoolgirls," and that in general school is a hostile place for most wannabe gang members. The chapter on schooling would have been stronger had Dietrich included more ethnographic detail to support these findings.

In spite of this shortcoming, *Chicana Adolescents* is a useful and timely book. It offers a much needed analysis of the gendered aspects of gang affiliation and of the factors that shape the life choices of a particular set of adolescent, working-class Chicanas, including their decisions with respect to staying in school. The final chapter provides a short discussion of the implications of study findings for school policy and practice. Readers in the fields of anthropology, sociology, Chicano/Latino studies, women's studies, and community studies will find the book of interest.

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