



***Mi Voz, Mi Vida: Latino College Students Tell Their Life Stories.* Andrew Garrod, Robert Kilkenny, and Christina Gómez. New York: Cornell University Press, 2007. 262 pp.**

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This book presents powerful and engaging stories written by fifteen Latina/o students at Dartmouth College. As I read these chapters, I could not help but recall some of my own experiences as an undergraduate student in the early 1960s (Turner 1994; Turner et al. 2006). I grew up in a close-knit family working as farm laborers in the fields of California. Many of the tensions I felt between commitment to college and family and my struggle to feel a part of the campus community are reflected in the stories of the current students showcased in this book.

Individual stories elaborate on the multifaceted face of Latina/o students in higher education; however, regardless of ethnicity, social class, immigrant status, and other points of difference, the challenge of fitting into the landscape of higher education remains as an undercurrent throughout the book. Other publications inform readers about the statistical context in which these students live: that they are growing in number; that they drop out of school in high numbers; and that they are grossly underrepresented amongst the student bodies in colleges and universities, public or private (see Turner and Garcia 2005). Stories told in this book provide insights that help to explain numerical data from the real-life perspectives of the individuals portrayed here. Portrayals, whether expressed numerically or in the narrative, are filtered through the lens of the author and/or researcher, but it is extremely important to give voice to the viewpoints of current Latina/o students as they tell their stories; stories emerging from their own experience. This text accomplishes this goal. From their personal perspectives, these successful Latina/o college students provide insights into their life challenges and supports. Many of the experiences presented here underscore the importance of mentoring, family and peer support, financial assistance, access to schooling that prepares them for college, and access to advising that helps them to recognize their talents as well as their educational opportunities. On the negative side are the continued stories of the struggle (*la lucha*) within an American society that would regulate them to stereotypes of failure and low promise. Their struggles revolve around the development of self-identity, the need to provide support for families undergoing various forms of crises, including financial stressors, encountering racism and/or sexism on a daily basis so that they have to constantly decide either to ignore it or to respond. Even if they choose not to respond, these challenges serve to remind them that they are an anomaly in American higher education and imply that they do not belong. They also describe the tremendous pressures to assimilate into a predominantly white campus community and to give up their Latina/o identities in order to conform to an academy that does not recognize and teach about the achievements of Latinas/os across the disciplines.



Providing a place for Latina/o students to voice their educational experiences in the literature is important, as shown in the following quotes that serve to highlight the four major themes emerging from their essays: Resilience, Biculturalism, Mentoring, and Identity.

Resilience: The Struggle to be Strong

In this section, Eric Martinez tells us about his struggle to "transcend the stereotypes of the Latino male." (p. 33); Joseph Rodriguez states that "it is...unfortunate...that in most elite places...white culture dominates, and any variance from that culture is not warmly received." (p. 47); Sarah Fox writes about searching for the familiar at Dartmouth: "...I found La Alianza, the college's Latino student organization...attending La Alianza meetings and events made me feel closer to home...It was like someone turned the light on in the closet and claimed that all my old junk was worth something after all...I had a rich cultural heritage of which I had been unaware. (p. 63).

Biculturalism: On Both Sides of The Border

José García says, "I was trying to find myself under years of buried ignorance, self-hate, and prejudice toward my own culture." (p. 84); Marissa Saldívar ends her chapter with a poignant question: "...are the social and financial privileges that my education has given me worth the deeper costs and losses of family and culture?...Was it worth it?" (p. 102); Abiel Acosta says, "I live a double life." (p. 104); Miguel Ramírez adds, "Like most first-generation college students...I moved up, and I can't go back. I love my home community..." (p. 126).

Mentoring: The Someone in My Life

Angelita Urena describes her family support: "As I shook the college president's hand and received my diploma, I heard my family roar with pride...I was proud to be one of a known handful of Dominicans to graduate from Dartmouth." (p.132); Robert Cotto says, "More than anybody else in my life, my mother has shown me not to let opportunities slip through my hands; she has always pushed me to seize chances..." (p.158); Viana Turcios describes challenges mitigated by family support: "On campuses where my Latino features have made me very visible, I felt I had to step up and do as well or better than those around me...[family support] made me strong enough for this challenge." (p. 182).

Latino Identities: Becoming and Unbecoming Latino

Alejo Alvarez states that "Becoming Latino for me has turned away from assimilating and instead is about realizing, internalizing the fact that I am Puerto Rican." (p. 200); Antonio Rodríguez describes Latinidad, "the common link that binds us all ethnically has been the struggle to be accepted and to incorporate ourselves into American society." (p.203); Norma Andrade ends her essay by stating that "Like myself, mi familia is forever changing and assimilating, but like me, they selectively assimilate in order to



retain a rich culture." (p. 228); Alessandro Meléndez describes his challenge: "As a black Latino on a small campus, I found a way to define and redefine my identity from the perspectives of both the African American and Latino communities." (p. 242); David Ralos concludes his essay remarking that "I'm sick of feeling like I am not a true Latino simply because I was not poor or disadvantaged....I want to be seen as successful, proud, and honest." (p. 260).

This book, while reflecting today many of the challenges I experienced years ago, gives me hope. The authors articulate critical issues facing them. In their unique ways, they have each met and overcome the challenges they describe. As a result of this process, they speak about themselves as stronger and more determined. They provide light along the pathway for those Latinas/os who will follow them into our higher education institutions. These authors will also have an opportunity to play a significant role in the development of our society's future. One author concludes: "I just hope I can be a new voice for those who live between the lines." (p. 242). The coeditors of this text are to be commended for providing a venue for the voices of these Latina/o students to be heard and for guiding them in the self-reflection and writing required to produce essays that shed much needed light on the Latina/o college experience.

References Cited

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