

BOOK REVIEW

Celebrating Debutantes and Quinceañeras: Coming of Age in American Ethnic Communities

Lorena V. Márquez

Celebrating Debutantes and Quinceañeras: Coming of Age in American Ethnic Communities. By Evelyn Ibatan Rodríguez. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. 2013. Pp. 213. \$29.95 (paper and e-book).

In *Celebrating Debutantes and Quinceañeras: Coming of Age in American Ethnic Communities*, Evelyn Ibatan Rodríguez eloquently records the functions and cultural significance of debutantes and quinceañeras. She places the reader front and center in one of the most anticipated events for Filipina and Mexican young women, arguing that these celebrations “reflect how Filipino and Mexican American immigrants and their children are positioned in the United States, as well as how they imagine who they are, where they come from, and who they want to become” (2). In essence, these coming-of-age traditions demonstrate how young Latinas and Filipinas cope, navigate, and challenge traditional cultural expectations and negotiate their multilayered identities.

The book is the product of fifty interviews of current and former female celebrants, family members, and “court” members, but also of others such as photographers, clergy, and dressmakers. It represents more than nine hundred debutantes and quinceañeras. The author is trilingual (English, Spanish, and Tagalog) and thus could interview and interact with participants in their primary languages. Although most of the research is centered in Las Querubes and Del Sol (both located in Southern

California), Rodríguez also conducted preliminary observations in the Philippines and central Mexico.

The book is divided into seven chapters ranging in topic and scope from historical overview to detailed descriptions and analysis of today's debutantes and quinceañeras. The early chapters provide a historical overview of Filipino and Mexican American histories as well as an explanation of the cultural significance of debuts and quinceañeras; they also provide critiques of two popular films, *Quinceañera* and *The Debut*, which detail the functions of family and community in debutantes and quinceañeras. The remaining chapters address gender construction in coming-of-age celebrations, "troublemakers," and debut and quince "troubles." The author's use of the terms "troubles" and "troublemakers," however, is somewhat problematic, given that the subjects are in adolescence or early adulthood—an age where many young people rebel. In the closing chapter, the author offers advice to future debutantes and quinceañeras.

Rodríguez makes an interesting claim that both Latino and Filipino immigrants attempt to differentiate themselves from white Americans by establishing themselves as morally superior. In doing so, they challenge and resist views of their communities as inferior (67). All the while, debuts and quinceañeras serve as a means to affirm one's ethnic heritage (83). Rodríguez argues, "Debuts and quinceañeras are rituals that are highly affective and require participants to represent and embody what it means to be a Filipina or a Mexican woman" (144). Indeed, the familial and cultural expectations placed on these girls and young women often creates pressure and stress to measure up to an unrealistic standard.

While Rodríguez argues that these celebrations are not economically impractical, others might disagree. Rodríguez notes that the economic burden

can be lightened by acquiring godparents (in the Mexican case) (47), and that the occasion is more than just a “shameful waste of money” (4). She argues that at the end of the day, parents continue to make sacrifices for their daughters because they believe they deserve to celebrate an important rite of passage. Parents take pride in being able to sponsor an elegant and generous event for their daughter, the larger family and their community. In many ways debutantes and quinceañeras are as much about the parents, who have been marginalized and racialized, as they are about providing a memorable occasion for the child to be treated as royalty rather than a second-class citizen. In fact, Rodríguez notes, these two issues are directly related.

While Rodríguez does a fine job of mapping the importance of quinceañeras and debutantes in their respective communities, she could have enriched our understanding of both events by offering a comparison to Anglo American’s sweet sixteen celebrations. This comparison did not need to be an extensive study; a brief comparison, perhaps in the opening chapter or in the introduction, would have allowed readers to understand the many cultural differences that exist among these celebrations. The strengths of the text, however, clearly outweigh these shortcomings. Her careful attention to the intersections of gender and ethnicity will render Rodríguez’s *Celebrating Debutantes and Quinceañeras* a useful and welcome text in interdisciplinary fields such as women’s studies, Chicano studies, American studies, and ethnic studies, as well as traditional disciplines such as sociology and anthropology. The book will have a strong appeal for students, especially students who might not have had a debut, quinceañera, or sweet sixteen party but may know of someone who did.