

BOOK REVIEW

Autogestión as a Transformative Path for Girls Resisting Violence and Stigma

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Juárez Girls Rising: Transformative Education in Times of Dystopia. By Claudia Cervantes-Soon. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017. Pp. 336. \$27.00.

How can a school's philosophy foster *autogestión*, a form of critical self-authorship, in young working-class women living in a context of profound violence? Claudia Cervantes-Soon explores this question at length in *Juárez Girls Rising: Transformative Education in Times of Dystopia*, an intentional ethnographic work that travels by weaving personal narratives into the development of collective consciousness. Much has been written about the violent history of Ciudad Juárez; however, there is no literature on the people who consciously decided to stay in the city, to resist and to imagine transformations. This is what sets this book apart—a long-term engagement with a school that fosters a pedagogy of hope in times of crisis and abandonment. Only a researcher whose own life makes her critical of the labels around constructions of womanhood can intimately explore the complex relation between the self and the environment. Cervantes-Soon, a native of the borderlands, recognizes the intricacies of education as an aspiration (Yosso, 2005) in connection with identity formation in a context that highly stigmatizes becoming a woman.

Cervantes-Soon reveals and interrogates the barriers of women's educational journeys in the US-Mexico borderlands, one of the most unequal spaces in

the world (Relaño Pastor, 2006) in which preconceptions surrounding border women have been historically constructed. Hence, Cervantes-Soon (2017) challenges us to resist deficit narratives and actually learn from a school that commits to a socially responsible praxis by “uncover[ing] the ways in which young working-class women in a unique school community resist victimization and hopelessness and about the ways in which education can offer a space for critical consciousness” (xi). As such, the school is a space where hope is redefined (70) by committing to education as a socially just transformative practice.

For the young girls of *Juárez Girls Rising*, “the struggle begins inside and outside its own classroom, where the Altavista continues to pursue a counterhegemonic discourse that extends out to the world” (70). The value of Altavista is the conscious commitment for the disinherited (65). Within a context where young women are constantly under threat, the school relies on their self-authorship as a process to foster what will become the most valuable inheritance: education (13). Against all odds, young girls reframe education as “meaningful knowledge that liberates” (269) in challenging places.

In this tone, the book is carefully organized into five chapters that denote how the border context is juxtaposed with the lived educational experiences of young Juárez women. Such contradictions are interrogated in significant ways within a school to redefine students’ possibilities. *Juárez Girls Rising* offers us a wealth of knowledge, but I will focus on three major contributions, which represent a humanistic *mujerista* approach toward justice.

The first contribution is the importance dedicated to understanding the lives of young border women by not only demystifying Western constructions about the so-called Third World, but further, providing alternative forms of interpretations for young women’s lives in different scenarios, but under similar

contexts of stigmatization. Consequently, young working-class women's stories are important because "they are often the carriers of the unwanted memories of the acts of violence that produced existing states, of forced conscription, or of violent extrusion as new states were formed" (Appadurai, 2006, Kindle edition). Thus, the analysis of *Juárez Girls Rising* represents a critical approach with value beyond the scope of the border. Second, in current times where schools are subject to criticism and doubt, Cervantes-Soon makes evident the transformative power of educational spaces where the student becomes an integral part on the construction of knowledge. Lastly, and perhaps the central idea of the book, is Cervantes-Soon's demonstration that a school's critical approach toward education can foster the connection between the processes of self-construction of identity in young women with the possibilities of collectively making changes in their surroundings. This is where the pedagogy of hope promoted by Altavista is enacted.

In *Juárez Girls Rising* teachers, critical thinkers, feminist theorists, and all those interested on subaltern pedagogies in need of urgent transformations will find lessons for their own circumstances. As one reads the book, it is unavoidable to ask if we are capable of learning from the least expected of places and the least expected people. The significance of Altavista School's philosophy is the idea that students need to be taught to understand the many dimensions that construct the unequal system of power around them, but not be limited by them.

References

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