

BOOK REVIEW

A Life on Hold: Living with Schizophrenia

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A Life on Hold: Living with Schizophrenia. By Josie Méndez-Negrete. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2015, pp. 273. \$24.95 (paper).

A Life on Hold: Living with Schizophrenia is Josie Méndez-Negrete's intimate and moving memoir of "living with and inside mental illness."

Bridging a feminist praxis and theory from an intersectional perspective, she "[calls] for alternative, more humane venues in the treatment of the mentally ill" (xvii). The significance of Méndez-Negrete's work is her storytelling that forces us to re-envision a world where living with schizophrenia is unconditionally accepted. As the first text to address a Mexican American family living with schizophrenia, *A Life on Hold* is written in an engrossing, "quilt of narratives." Méndez-Negrete weaves shifting perspectives and offers a complex narrative of a mother and son's struggles with schizophrenia. The narrative challenges today's medical discourses, engages a nonconforming structure of storytelling, and grants authority to marginalized voices. Humanizing the stark picture of schizophrenia is Méndez-Negrete's ten stunning portraits of her son Tito's fierce struggle to live.

In the opening chapter, Méndez-Negrete maps schizophrenia as a social and cultural phenomenon. Invested in removing its stigma and working from a politics of inclusion, her methodological and epistemological considerations allow readers to recognize the way schizophrenia is a socially constructed affliction. Refusing to reify normative mental illness classifications, Méndez-Negrete questions the social treatment that denies persons with

schizophrenia their humanity. Yet *A Life on Hold* keeps as its focus Roberto “Tito” López, Jr., and his agency, desires, and fears. Creating a space where Tito can tell his stories, Méndez-Negrete offers an antidote of talk therapy that is empowering, healing, and liberating. Confronting the cultural deficits or pathologizing associated with mental illness, the telling of stories allows Tito to recover his agency and intersubjectivity. Tito tells stories about his identity that “change the disabling images and memories” (Anzaldúa 1990, xxvii) and “awaken his spirit” (112). “The storytelling provides him an alternative to accepting the limitations of the illness” (xvi). For if he forgets his stories, he forgets life itself.

The most emphatic and compelling stories force us to witness Tito’s insufferable delusions, hallucinations, paranoia, and depression, combated by his wit and humor. Méndez-Negrete shows how his anguish comes from his intense desire for love, a family of his own, including children. Affirming his right to exist, Méndez-Negrete remarks, “I don’t want you dead, son. Other people have it more difficult than you do. Try to find the hope inside yourself” (170). Pushing Tito to position himself in the larger context of society, Méndez-Negrete offers a way for him to make meaning of the conditions and restraints in his life.

Throughout the text, Méndez-Negrete addresses the many ways Tito negotiates and copes with schizophrenia, strategies that defy essentialist notions of the condition. For example, he deploys strategies such as smoking because it “muffles the voices and quiets the nameless faces that live inside” (200). Cigarettes also serve as currency to social relationships and amenities, as Méndez-Negrete articulates in “Cigarette Wealth.” “I’m a big man about town when I have cigarettes to dispense or money to lend. Cigarettes make me count to those around me” (203). Told from Tito’s perspective, the scene shows his attempt to reclaim power within his existing reality.

In a self-reflective analysis, Méndez-Negrete reveals her embodied solidarity, or what she refers as the “emotional placenta,” to show the way her son’s illness affects her physical body and psyche. For example, in a later chapter, “Board-and-Care Warehousing,” she writes, “I finally accepted that I could not tend to my son” (141). In “Whose Reality,” Méndez-Negrete fleshes her experience, “My body had made me aware that it stored, like a silo, all the complications of your illness, making me conscious of the emotions that could emerge at any time” (238). Through the sustained emotional labor, she recognizes the multiple structural dimensions of the illness that require creating spaces for listening. The chapter is powerfully written, and read within the context of Méndez-Negrete’s critique of the racial bias, mistreatment, and exploitation within the rehabilitation and psychiatric institutions where Tito spent most of his life, contains a forceful critique of care, human rights, the medical establishment and community resources in today’s society.

In the closing chapters, Méndez-Negrete’s vision and holistic approach contribute to a liberatory ethics that allows for vulnerability. Employing Gloria Anzaldúa’s *facultad*, her theory emerges from her personal pain and suffering to envision a more humane and compassionate world. Claiming alternative epistemologies, Méndez-Negrete problematizes institutional oppressions and posits a relational worldview that improves the human condition.

Weaving threads of solidarity, *A Life on Hold* demands to be read by scholars of Chicana/o Studies, women and gender studies, sociology, social work, disability studies as well as by families and practitioners who work in the mental health system. Méndez-Negrete’s intellectual work expands our understanding of schizophrenia as livable, with the potential to change how it is experienced and managed. Her feminist treatment uses the flesh of her experience in personal, emotional, and bodily terms to offer a liberatory model of health.

References

- Anzaldúa, G. 1990. "Haciendo Caras, Una Entrada." In *Making Face: Making Soul: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color*, edited by Gloria Anzaldúa, xv-xxviii. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.

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