

“God give me the patience to hear and listen to my son and the strength to help Tito as he narrates his stories and tells me about his life. There are times like I feel like I’m in his shoes, that I too am becoming mentally ill, but he reminds me I need to stay together so I can be there for him.”

—Josie Méndez-Negrete, *A Life on Hold: Living with Schizophrenia* (82)

## BOOK REVIEW

### Dentro de las nubes busqué claridad: por cariño y amor a mi hijo desafié el frío de la sociedad

Jesus Jaime-Díaz

*A Life on Hold: Living with Schizophrenia*. By Josie Méndez-Negrete. University of New Mexico Press, 2015. 296 pages. \$24.95 (paperback); \$ 9.99 (e-book).

**Mental illness** in Western culture has been a stigma that has reinforced the rendering of second-class treatment, and dehumanization for those who struggle with such conditions. In *A Life on Hold: Living with Schizophrenia*, Josie Méndez-Negrete, Professor Emerita at the University of Texas San Antonio in the Mexican American Studies Program, incorporates Chicana feminist methodologies by utilizing memory to reflect on lived experiences. With this book she challenges traditional colonial methodologies normalized within academia that have historically privileged dominant epistemologies as ways of knowing. Throughout the book she illuminates the social and cultural barriers that reinforce the stigma of otherness. She

problematizes such normative discourses by utilizing theory in the flesh and sharing the experiences of her eldest son, Tito, as he struggles throughout his life with schizophrenia. Méndez-Negrete, as in her previous book *Las Hijas de Juan: Daughters Betrayed* uses an autoethnographic methodological approach to connect her personal experiences to broader cultural, political, and social meanings as a means of raising critical awareness. However, in *A Life on Hold* Méndez-Negrete moves away from traditional chapters, and implements short reads, or what she refers to as a “quilt of narratives” to guide the reader.

In reading the book, I felt the pain associated with behavioral expectations in Mexican culture that are dictated within machista circles. Méndez-Negrete recounts Tito’s experience among her relatives in the valley of Tabasco Zacatecas, where he went with the hope of “la cultura es cura;” the culture is cure. “It was then, in desperation and after exploring a number of options, that you and Dad took the tíos’—Gabriel and Juanita’s—offer for me to live in the ranch with them, you sent me to the pinche *rancho*, sent me to Mexico to set me straight...The place that everyone hoped would be the magic pill” (18). The author had been advised by family that perhaps sending Tito amongst family in Mexico would help him get well. In detail, Tito recalls the environment, music, food, and lived reality of being Mexican American. “My tíos thought I was at best a distraction from *El Norte*. They got a few laughs at my expense, making fun of my *gringo* ways. My accent gave them a laugh. They mocked me when I mixed my English and Spanish, because I didn’t sound like them” (20). Such experiences become an underlying lynchpin throughout Tito’s life as he remembers, and often makes reference to his time in Mexico. But it is through such lived experience that Tito is able to recall memories of his past as he struggled in navigating his mental condition.

Méndez-Negrete, throughout the book, searches for answers that contributed to Tito's condition. The author simultaneously speaks of the struggles associated with the health care system, the bureaucratic contradictions of diagnosing schizophrenia, and the difficulty in finding treatment for Tito:

“They were taking me for a ride. They made you go through all types of red tape to prove my illness was real, going against the hope that my illness could have been something treatable. But come to think of it, Momma, you were forced to dig up what led to my mental illness, you had to write letters to fight and advocate for my benefits, finally made you accept the fact that I was really sick. There was no denying it.” (191)

Méndez-Negrete throughout the book speaks of the guilt associated with seeing her son struggle with schizophrenia, and often tries to link personal choices, genetic and empirical evidence as a way to find understanding and inner-serenity: “You questioned what you could have done differently, even to the point of retracing what you ate when you were pregnant with me, remember?” (173-174). This reflection often emerges throughout the book, but serves as a pivot of internal peace and serenity in the acceptance of Tito's condition. The author continuously speaks of struggles and shortcomings in Tito being provided adequate and ample treatment for schizophrenia. Méndez-Negrete reflects on the difficulty of Tito being diagnosed and finding institutional care for him, explaining, “With families who don't understand or cannot tend to us, we end up housed in these places eating day-old food or mush that takes our appetites away” (150). There is a redundant theme that often emerges throughout the book on the mistreatment and exploitation Tito receives in being bounced from one institution to the other, often to facilities that were not state licensed to care for the mentally challenged.

In finding alternative spaces to explore how schizophrenia is viewed and treated, Méndez-Negrete asserts the importance of listening differently and compassionately. She writes, “My very sense of self depends on the way I stay connected to the life I lived before the channels turned on inside—that time before I turned twenty-one, when the meltdown happened with the overdose of crank on that Fourth of July 1991” (224). What she observes in Tito throughout his life is the need to be listened to, in particular the stories of his past life which serve as latent value for him to remember his previous state of mind, and the dreams and aspirations that he and loved ones had for himself: “When I visit him, he still wants to talk about what was—the past as he recalls it. Repeating some old stories and creating new ones, he tries to calm himself, to ameliorate the ravages of the disease” (248). Such memories keep him balanced and connected to his humanity from his former life as he struggles with his mental challenges. The author also speaks of the difficulty of setting boundaries and separating her heart from her mind. In caring for Tito, at times from long distances, it was excruciatingly painful to have to balance her professional and personal responsibilities: “My son had had enough of retelling his story. Exhausted, he suddenly wanted to stop. Before he left to hang out and smoke, I gave him a bear hug and said my until-next times. I had to catch a plane in three hours, and getting there early would give me a chance to catch up on grading” (189). Méndez-Negrete further asserts in the book the importance for making the best with the life that they have been given, stating, “Understanding your loneliness and neediness, there are times I am thankful for the distance. I’m not always resentful about your desire to call me into your life. The life you live, despite being thousands of miles away in what I feel is a safe environment, makes my daily steps easier” (239). Such mindfulness, she advises, is a prerequisite of her trying to balance inner peace and coping with her son’s condition while she obtained her Ph.D. and advanced through her professional career.

The book ends with the guiding principle of humanizing mental challenges such as schizophrenia. It's a call to action by using a theory in the flesh and sharing the personal story of her eldest son Tito, but also of her family in the struggle to deconstruct the socially constructed deficit views of mental illness. It's a call for humanizing mental illness and considering alternative practices in how the mentally challenged are treated both mentally and socially: "I have to remind myself to remain supportive, empathetic, and caring as I continue to practice the act of listening with a heart. My son needs that more than the desire to exercise my authority as his mother" (257). By sharing the day to day, month to month and year to year realities of the Tito, Méndez-Negrete opens for consideration a humanization of those who are stigmatized as the mentally challenged. There is a need to problematize and deconstruct ideologies that continue to create social distance for those who are considered invisible and invaluable.

The message Josie Méndez-Negrete leaves behind through an autoethnographic methodological approach in using a quilt of narratives, is not to prioritize one experience of a disease over another—in Tito's case, schizophrenia. She encourages readers to take a self-reflexive look into how those who are stigmatized by their mental illness and rendered an oppressed class who are not cared for adequately by the health system in the United States. She affirms that as historical epochs in time change, we must continue to be mindful of the prejudiced views with which we have been socialized toward the mentally challenged in society. Méndez-Negrete further argues that as a nation we continue to blame the victim for her/his insanity, and that this perspective promotes the dehumanization, classification, and social control of those who are stigmatized as mentally ill. This becomes particularly true of our comfort zones; as long as our lives are not disrupted, we can live with the consequences of those who are labeled as "the other" through mental illness,

such as schizophrenia. Josie Méndez-Negrete calls readers to action and advises that we must create alternative treatments with a holistic approach in treating mental illness. Ultimately, Méndez-Negrete asserts that we must become conscious of embracing differences in those who think and act outside of what have been socialized and conditioned to accept as the norm.