



JOURNAL OF CRITICAL THOUGHT AND PRAXIS

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY DIGITAL PRESS & SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Volume 7

Issue 1 *Who Belongs? Immigrants, Refugees, Migrants and Actions Towards Justice*

Article 10

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By Susana M. Muñoz.

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Book Review

Identity, Social Activism, and the Pursuit of Higher Education: The Journey Stories of Undocumented and Unafraid Community Activists

By: Susana M. Muñoz. Peter Lang, 2015. 142 pp. ISBN: 978-1433125584

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Identity, Social Activism, and the Pursuit of Higher Education is the first book by Dr. Susana Muñoz. It is a report of her critical, qualitative research with 13 young adults who were undocumented immigrants to the United States, brought by their parents as children or young teenagers. In the first chapter, Muñoz (2015) outlines the purpose, research questions, theoretical framework, and methods which informed and guided her study. The next six chapters then present the participants and themes emerging from her interviews. In the final chapter, Chapter Eight, Muñoz offers implications and recommendations for primary and secondary schools, as well as colleges and universities to support the educational pursuits of youth who are “undocumented and unafraid.” Published in the penultimate year of U.S. President Barack Obama’s term in office, this book gains new import in the face of increasing threats to immigrant and refugee communities in this country and the phasing out of Obama’s executive order, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) by the current U.S. President, Donald Trump.

Muñoz is a scholar of higher education with specific interests in student development theory alongside the college experiences of immigrant youth. However, she does not approach the research reported in this text from a distant and disaffected academic stance. Rather, consistent with her constructivist and critical methodological stance, Muñoz has situated herself squarely in the research, discussing her own positionality as a Chicana feminist and childhood migrant, accompanying her mother without proper documentation under the auspices of her White, U.S. citizen stepfather. She notes her own privilege, despite the circumstances of her arrival, of being able to gain U.S. citizenship through her stepfather’s sponsorship. Moreover, each chapter begins with an epigraph related to the chapter’s theme pulled from her research journal, in which she reflected on elements of her own story or observational notes from rallies and other actions in which she participated. As noted by Stella Flores in her foreword to the book, readers are offered the opportunity to “delve deeply into [Muñoz’s] background and personal plight” (p. xii) and directly see how researcher positionality influences one’s approach to the research. Being a student of methodology, I found this particularly refreshing and a welcome departure from the superficial listing of social identities that has become an all-too-common stand-in for the depth of reflexivity demanded by constructivist and critical methodologies and capably demonstrated by Muñoz.

Another feature of this strong example of rigorous qualitative research, Muñoz (2015) introduces the reader to the rich, interior lives of these 13 undocumented and unafraid

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community activists living in several states across the U.S. Among her participants are those who had completed their undergraduate degrees and were in graduate school, a majority who were working through their first college degrees in either community colleges or four-year institutions, as well as others who had stopped out from pursuing higher education at the time of Muñoz's research. All born in either México or Central America, their migration stories are presented and paired with their initial educational experiences in the U.S. The interview data presented by Muñoz makes clear how woefully underserved many of these students were by high school guidance counselors and college admission officers who were largely uninformed about college access and financial resources available to undocumented youth. Despite ineligibility for federal financial aid and varying state policies concerning tuition rates, college access is possible for undocumented youth but the uneven patchwork of state legislation and institutional policies has resulted in widely variant levels of support and challenge for these students. Some of her participants were able to attend college and go on to graduate school with full scholarships, while others had to find means to work to pay for tuition and other expenses. The consequences of this lack of a uniform approach to access and inclusion for undocumented collegians is evident in the data Muñoz presents in the text.

Another contribution Muñoz (2015) makes with her book is the advancement of legal consciousness as an aspect of social identity and identity development. Drawing from the work of Abrego (2011) and other scholars, Muñoz employs legal consciousness in her research to highlight how "illegality" is socially constructed and attaches to someone's sense of self, how they make meaning of themselves, and how they negotiate their interactions with others and with institutional systems. Alongside legal consciousness, Muñoz also operationalizes two other concepts, *la facultad* and *nepantla*. Muñoz adopted Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) usage of *la facultad*, a Spanish word, as "the ability to peek into one's soul as one contemplates self-meaning" (Muñoz, 2015, p. 10). When a person's consciousness becomes quickened and a deeper meaning is perceived, *la facultad* provides a means to access resiliency and resistance, a critical element in Anzaldúa's (1999) formation of a new mestiza consciousness. *Nepantla* then is an indigenous term describing a "space of tension and a space of possible transformation" (Alemán, Delgado Bernal, & Mendoza, 2013, p. 326). Through *nepantla*, individuals are able to resist the colonizing pressure of conformity and embrace their authenticity (Muñoz, 2015).

Mobilizing legal consciousness through *la facultad* and *nepantla* as an identity meaning-making construct enables Muñoz (2015) to analyze her participants' stories beyond their representation as just another subsample of the college-going demographic. Rather, Muñoz capably articulates and demonstrates the personal and personalizing effect of law and policy actions on individuals' identity and meaning-making. Through Muñoz's work the reader sees that policies matter, not just for how they shape people's lives, but also for the ways that policies shape how people understand who they are "with the law... or against the law" (Abrego, 2011, p. 360).

Muñoz (2015) attempts an intersectional analysis, but does not carry it out fully. Though noting the presence of other minoritized identities among the participants, such as sexuality, her analysis does not delve into the ways that the state constructs sexuality along the lines of legality. The work of such queer and trans immigration activists as Jennicet Gutiérrez (2015) evidence the co-construction of gender transgression and undocumented immigrant status, where transgressive sexualities and genders invite greater scrutiny of

immigrants within the carceral state. Relatedly, in Chapter Four, Muñoz seeks to illustrate parallels between disclosure of one's undocumented status and disclosing sexuality, coming out is framed as a construct experienced by both undocumented people and those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or otherwise fall outside heterosexuality. However, the discussion here falters and perhaps would have been better served by Orbe's (1998) co-cultural communication model of how marginalized groups communicate within dominant institutional structures. Moreover, contemporary research disrupts the notion of coming out as a linear and intrapersonal process (Garvey & Rankin, 2015; Klein, Holtby, Cook, & Travers, 2015) for queer and trans people.

As her data collection was concluding, President Obama issued DACA; some of Muñoz's (2015) participants were going through the process of applying for DACA or had become "DACAmended." In Chapter Seven, Muñoz illustrates the cautious relief DACA provided to those who were able to access it. These students were conscious of the juxtaposition of opportunity and increased surveillance that came with submitting the intimate details of their and their families' lives and journeys to the U.S. Moreover, Muñoz's students were not satisfied with a temporary solution that provided no relief for their parents and other relatives who remain undocumented and cannot "come out of the shadows," a term used to describe life without papers for immigrants in the U.S. Nevertheless, they were committed to using their present DACAmended status to advocate for immigrant rights and resist xenophobic notions of citizenship and territoriality.

Overall, Muñoz (2015) has offered an important and passionate account of how national immigration policy interacts with institutional policy to delimit college access and identity meaning-making for undocumented youth. Given the present climate for immigrants and refugees in the U.S., Muñoz's findings and recommendations are instructive for educational policy makers, as well as for students and scholars of equity and justice in postsecondary education. Put into conversation with Leigh Patel's (2013) earlier book, *Youth Held at the Border*, Muñoz contributes to a growing literature that advances a critical narrative about undocumented youth that disrupts deservingness rhetoric but rather proposes that these young adults are worthy of investment and support simply because they are.

Author Notes

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