



Wise Latinas: Writers on Higher Education

Leon, Jennifer De, ed.
University of Nebraska Press, 2014

Book Review

Tags: activism | higher education | social justice

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As a non-Latina author, I was moved and enlightened by this compilation of twenty-two writings, weaving complex narratives from across the Americas with heritage(s) in US-American, Cuban, Mexican, Colombian, Guatemalan, Panamanian, black, Dominican Republic strands and more. Jennifer de Leon states her purposes: to dispel stereotypes of Latinas, fend off their isolation in higher education, invite activism toward social justice, and offer opportunity for each contributor to share her unique voice and wisdom (4-5). I myself stand in a line of women writing for change – *Women Writing for (a) Change*, located in Cincinnati, Ohio, with affiliate sites across the country – so these stories drew *me* all the way in. The book contributes well toward its aims, though the challenge remains for the reader to make the necessary transitions from authors’ narratives into concrete action for change. This is a liberationist text for cultural and women’s studies, college freshman seminars, educational ministries, and various creative and essay writing courses in postsecondary education.

Wise Latinas locates itself well within feminist, mujerista, and liberationist reflections on higher education, specifically in the areas of pedagogy and narrative. I was reminded of *True Confessions: Feminist Professors Tell Stories Out of School*, edited by Susan Gubar (W.W. Norton, 2011), though de Leon’s compilation expands horizons by attending to “rooms of their own.” The organization of the work into four sections holds the reader’s attention in a persuasive arc – Worlds Apart, Rooms of Our Own, Inside These Academic Walls, and In Tribute, In Time.

Each section touches themes of voice (lost and found), body, family (especially daughter norms), virtue, worth, intellect, belonging (and socialization away from belonging), hospitality (often unwelcome or misunderstood in fragmented, highly mobile US contexts), gender, orientation, race, and more. Unable to do justice to each essay, I offer only a couple

observations. Celeste Guzman Mendoza offers a bold, integrative writing in bilingual prose – “Las Otras” – relating her surprise at the commonalities across ethnic identities while holding to her own distinctive communicative medium, a mix of English and untranslated Spanish. I loved the demand to confront Spanish (or ignorance of it) in the reader. In “Rapunzel’s Ladder,” Julia Alvarez offers a stinging summary of higher education’s disempowerment of cultural traditioning (by schooling) and asks crucial pedagogical questions for social justice education. Chantel Acevedo’s reflections name the difficulty for a woman leaving home for school before marriage – Cuban ‘exile trauma,’ she calls it – which prefigures a difficult journey in the often nomadic academic life. One painful paradox arose in several writings: substantial parental pressure to succeed in school simultaneous with their great displeasure upon daughters leaving home to pursue said education. Throughout, the strengths of Latina wisdom arise out of hard won experience and culturally-rooted heritage awash in a world that can overwhelm.

Wise Latinas is a good read, with narrative essays, poetic dialogues, and creative expression of the journeys many Latinas in higher education have travelled. One intention was to combat the isolation Latinas face there. A happy side effect is that outsiders are invited to listen and learn, attuned to this distinct expression of an existential isolation that higher education – as currently configured – seems to insure.

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