

Book Notes

GIRLHOOD IN THE BORDERLANDS: MEXICAN TEENS CAUGHT IN THE CROSSROADS OF MIGRATION

by Lilia Soto

New York: New York University Press, 2018. 272 pp. \$30 (paper).

In *Girlhood in the Borderlands*, Lilia Soto deftly pulls readers into the worlds of Mexican girls living in Zinapécuaro, Michoacán, and Napa, California. Through interviews with fifty-nine girls between the ages of thirteen and nineteen, Soto illuminates how migration affects every aspect of the girls' lives, shaping their aspirations, their friendships and romantic relationships, their roles in their families, and, ultimately, where and how they lay down roots. To make sense of the girls' experiences in these two distinct places, Soto draws on the framework of transnationalism, which allows for an "exploration of plural and diverse conceptions of nation, home, identity, place, placelessness, and belonging" (p. 15). Echoing the themes of the book, Soto's methodology transcends the boundaries of nation-states, as she conducts interviews in two countries over a period of six years, as well as the boundaries of discipline, as she engages with and extends scholarship on migration and gender in anthropology, sociology, and education.

One of Soto's most important contributions with this book is the deliberate attention she pays to girls and to the ways age and gender influence their experiences of migration, intersections of identity that have too often been ignored in migration research. Through interviews and participant-observations in homes, schools, churches, and public spaces, she first explores the experiences of forty girls in one Mexican town, Zinapécuaro, where migrating north to work in the United States is a common and accepted economic strategy for families. She then brings in the lives and voices of nineteen girls in Napa, a place where migration has grown to meet the labor demands of the tourist industry, again drawing on interviews and observations to document how the girls adapt to their new environment. Anticipating possible critiques of the term *girls* as demeaning or infantilizing, Soto compellingly explains that embracing girlhood as a particular phase of life offers a more in-depth, critical exploration of the gendered discourses that affect girls as they leave childhood and become women. Through this lens, readers come to understand the burgeoning power the girls exert as they anticipate migrating from Mexico to the United States. Yet, Soto also makes clear the limits of the girls' power in the face of patriarchal family structures that leave their fathers in charge of

the migratory decision making for the entire family. The long tradition of rich scholarship that examines gender and migration often neglects to interrogate how the particularly vulnerable stage of girlhood impacts both perceptions of migration and its effect on young women's lives (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Mahler & Pessar, 2006; Menjívar, 2000). By centering gender and age, *Girlhood in the Borderlands* shines light on how the often-mundane details of girls' lives are molded by their fathers' journeys to El Norte and the ever-present possibility of their own migration.

Soto brings readers into the bedrooms, kitchens, and town plazas where the girls live with vivid detail, yet she is careful to ensure that we don't mistakenly see these migrations as merely individual decisions, calling our attention to the often invisible forces of political and economic globalization that compel people to migrate. In the beginning of the book, she outlines the changes in US and international labor and immigration policy that ultimately lead to the creation of transnational families. As the book develops, she focuses her lens increasingly on the girls themselves, skillfully and subtly reminding us that the girls are embedded in a broader context that constrains and enables each family's decisions about migration. Soto weaves in discussions of the political economies of Mexico and the US without casting these systems as overly deterministic; the families exert agency in deciding when to leave Mexico, when to return, and which family members will go or stay.

Placing the unique stage of girlhood firmly at the heart of the book, Soto first turns her attention to her Zinapécuaro participants. Because of patriarchal social and cultural norms that imbue Mexican fathers with outsized power in decisions about migration, she categorizes the girls' families into four types based on the fathers' roles and migration histories: (1) ghostlike fathers who are absent from the girls' lives, except for occasionally sending remittances; (2) father-present families in which the fathers return regularly or play a significant role in the girls' lives; (3) previously transnational families where the fathers have returned from the US and now live with the family in Mexico; and (4) heteronormative families where the fathers have never migrated. She argues that migration has served to queer the traditional family structure of two married parents with children residing in the same home, not because it upends heteronormative romantic partnerships but because when the traditional head of the family migrates, authority and control are redistributed among those left behind, even as the father continues to make decisions about migration.

Although other research examines how migration changes patterns of power in the family, Soto importantly focuses our attention on how these shifts in familial roles create opportunities for girls to exert agency, even as they are mostly beholden to their fathers' financial support and decisions about who migrates when. They avoid being at home when they don't want to speak to their fathers. They go out with their boyfriends openly once their fathers return to the US for work. They critique their fathers' drinking habits. They

forge strong and sustaining relationships with the other women in their lives—friends, mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and sisters. In these ways, the girls push back against patriarchal norms that would render them silent subjects to their fathers', and then their partners', power. Despite this “fragile agency,” many of the girls' futures are determined by their fathers, who issue the call to migrate and provide financial or legal assistance for the passage. Male dominance even impacts Soto's data collection; when she returned to Zinapécuaro to conduct follow-up interviews, some of her participants' partners refused to allow the girls to be interviewed.

Throughout the narratives of the Mexican girls in both Zinapécuaro and Napa, Soto highlights temporality, or how the prospect of migration produces a certain set of imaginaries for the girls as they wait to migrate. The future feels so unknown, and yet the girls often pause their own education plans to prepare for a potential migration. The girls on both sides of the border want to become *personas realizadas*, fulfilled or realized people, but they are immersed in competing and contradictory discourses about education, womanhood, and migration. As Soto poignantly illustrates, they “have to navigate a very thin line between options, desires, and respectability—all while operating under parents' expectations for them to do well” (p. 99) and all while being unable to control the decision about when to migrate. She shares the girls' reactions to “the telling moment” when they learn they will leave Mexico, often with little notice; it's a moment full of anticipation, fear, yearning, and sadness. We see girls saying harried goodbyes to family members, packing furiously, and visiting the places they love one more time, unsure if they will return. She gives readers a powerful, provocative glimpse into this profound moment in these girls' lives, revealing the complexity of their emotions and their feelings of powerlessness about migration as they teeter on the edge between childhood and womanhood. In doing so, she enriches the field of migration research by illuminating how age and gender are driving forces in how migrants make sense of and respond to the moment of departure.

On the other side of the border, Soto paints an equally critical and evocative portrait of Napa, the prosperous wine-growing region in California. Similar to other recent scholarship about place and migration, Soto's study demonstrates how the particular social and geographic features of Napa influence girls' lives upon their arrival (Castañeda, 2019; García & Schmalzbauer, 2017). Here, too, the girls encounter constraints emerging from the intersections of race, gender, and age. Like their counterparts in Zinapécuaro, the girls in Napa wait—for their mothers and fathers to come home from their work in the vineyards or restaurants, for their families to have enough money to move out of the tiny living spaces they share, for Sundays to go to the flea market, a central gathering place for Mexican immigrants in the region. In Napa, the girls and their families are pushed to the margins as economic growth and tourism take priority. Soto masterfully attends to the details, showing how the day laborers are made to seek work inside a community organization rather

than on the street where they would be visible to tourists. Even church is not free from efforts to erase migrants' presence, as the English-speaking congregants force the Spanish-language mass to end early; this way, Mexican families are gone before the wealthy, predominantly white visitors visit the wineries and restaurants lining the central square.

Although she effectively demonstrates how structural factors like US immigration policies and Mexican economic crises engender family separation, Soto underestimates the role of illegality on the lives of undocumented migrants to the US and the family members they leave behind. Illegality is not a trait inherent to any individual but a state-produced construct that limits the rights of any migrants who enter a nation-state without officially sanctioned permission (Coutin, 2013; DeGenova, 2002). From this vantage point, it is understandable that Soto does not want to contribute to the notion that a human being can be illegal. Yet, legal status permeates everyday life for migrants to the US, from the chance to access education and employment opportunities, to psychological well-being, to the ability to visit family in the nation of origin (Abrego, 2014; Gonzales, 2016). Soto's analysis of the social, political, and economic context surrounding migration would have been strengthened by a deeper interrogation of how legal status perpetuates inequalities within and across borders and determines the length and nature of family separation. While she vividly describes how the girls miss their lives and families on the other side, regardless of what side of the border they are on, more attention to how legal status prohibits or enables travel would have enriched our understanding of why these girls must contend with family separation.

As the title suggests, throughout the book Soto reveals how girls live in the borderlands in Mexico and the United States, making an important contribution to migration and educational research by amplifying the girls' own voices and experiences. For educators—in California, in Michoacán, and in any place where migration is woven into the fabric of families' lives—this is the importance of *Girlhood in the Borderlands*. It can help us understand that girls are living transnationally, even as they may be rooted in one location. It can help us have empathy for the many burdens they shoulder. It can help us place girls' individual experiences within the larger context of social, political, and economic forces that shape their lives and migrations. And it can help us recognize moments of agency, however fragile or fleeting, as moments worth celebrating.

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THE HEART OF THE MATTER: TRANSFORMING OUR SCHOOL THROUGH STUDENT LEADERSHIP

by Peer Group Connection Students at Morris Academy for Collaborative Studies

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WE MAKE THE RULES

by Students at Morris Academy for Collaborative Studies

New York: Student Press Initiative, 2018. 32 pp. \$5 (paper).

In English classrooms, afterschool programs, and youth centers across the country, students are becoming published authors. Student-focused publishing houses, such as 826 National, which operates through a neighborhood writing resource center model, and the Teachers College Student Press Initiative (SPI), which operates as a university-affiliated “part professional development, part artist collaboration and part not-for-profit publisher,” have created pathways for students to publish their own work with help from educators (Student Press Initiative, n.d.). These sorts of organizations partner with teachers to plan and run writing lessons, units, and projects that culminate in professionally published anthologies of student work available for public purchase. The motivation for teachers and students to undertake the publication process is no mystery: it gives teachers the opportunity to design authentic writing assignments with real audiences in mind and allows students to feel a sense of investment and excitement when they know their work is going to be printed, bound, and shared. These publications typically take the form of compilations of student essays or poems on a specific topic, often autobiographical or about students’ personal aspirations or visions for a better world. Many present students’ concrete ideas for how to improve their schools and neighborhoods.

The impact of these organizations on publishing is formidable. SPI has published more than 500 student-authored books since 2002, and 826 National boasted 993 student publications across its nine chapters in 2017–2018 alone.