

Nájera, Jennifer R. 2024. Learning to lead. Undocumented students mobilizing education. Durham, London: Duke University Press. 176 pp. Pb.: \$25.95. ISBN: 9781478030539.

Book review by

Xenia Valeth

Universidad de Sevilla (Spain)

In times of Western governments' increasingly hostile immigration politics, accounts like Jennifer Nájera's empathetic ethnography of undocumented students organizing to advocate for their rights on and beyond a Californian college campus become essential. Focusing on the entanglement of activism, education and the subjective experience of being young and undocumented in the US, Nájera's book is a highly recommended read for migrations and social movement scholars, but also for school and college staff concerned about how to contribute to their immigrant students' wellbeing.

Learning to Lead is based on four years of ethnographic fieldwork—from 2013 to 2017—with the undocumented Latinx students' organization PODER at UC Riverside. Among the most captivating aspects of the book are Nájera's vivid accounts of her young interlocutors' migration stories and the economic, legal and psychological hardships each of them had to face to be able to access college. Having entered the US with their families as young children, at emerging adulthood many experience tensions due to the barriers and stigmas derived from their legal status despite "having learned to be 'American' (or at least American Latinx)" (p. 66) throughout their socialization in the American school system. On the other hand, their youth and high academic achievements make them eligible for legal benefits and financial aids that put them into a privileged position in comparison to their parents' generation. Throughout the book, Nájera joins PODER's efforts to deconstruct the "ideology of immigrant deservingness" (p. 20) that instrumentalizes children's lack of agency when it comes to deciding about migrating. As all her research participants point out the importance of their parents' role for their personal

growth as hardworking students, advocates and individuals without papers, the author emphasizes “undocumented pedagogies of home” (p. 60) as informal educational practices that set the ground for political subjectivation.

Building on Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Nájera shows how a political collective like PODER becomes a site of both learning and teaching for its members. Students usually join the organization at the beginning of their college years, mostly without any previous experience in political advocacy work. They grow into their role as activists through generational transmission inside PODER as well as specific skill-sharing events where organized students from several colleges come together to acquire tools such as mounting campaigns or building a speech out of their own life stories. Their personal background also capacitates them to organize student-led Know Your Rights workshops where they overcome the student-teacher dichotomy and collectivize the skills and information they themselves had to learn for their survival in an educational system that was built with no sensitivity towards undocumented migrants.

An especially valuable quality of Nájera’s ethnography is her focus on the emotional and affective experience of politicizing one’s position as a student without papers. Though the activists build strength and union through the slogan “Undocumented and unafraid!”, many of them admit to not feeling quite as unafraid as suggested. Some of them having been raised to keep their legal status secret at all costs, they fear that public exposure as “unapologetically undocumented” (p. 133) activists might increment their own or their families’ risk of deportation. Nájera’s refreshingly novelistic style lets the reader stand in the shoes of the young advocates as they bravely learn to resignify “being undocumented not just as a status but as an identity—one of which [they do] not necessarily need to be ashamed” (p. 71). An important focus of her argument lies on the intertwining of individual and collective empowerment: it is PODER’s efforts at community building that allow for newcomers to develop a sense of belonging to the organization and UC Riverside and ultimately feel safe enough to take the leap into political engagement as part of a wider undocumented migrants’ movement.

From a methodological stance, Nájera defines her approach as “research acompañamiento” (p. 10). Inspired by activist anthropology, theologians and education scholars, she understands “acompañamiento as a praxis that includes being with another, as well as feeling and doing with another” (p. 10). She underlines her wish to stand in solidarity with PODER and her research participants as individuals by offering her knowledge gained from a citizen professor’s point of view as an addition to the undocumented students’ perspectives. However, reflexivity on the ethnographer’s position regard-

ing her interlocutors is unfortunately not one of the book's strongest points. While she does identify as a professor in the introduction of the book, no attention is given to possible dilemmas due to the power relations implicit in establishing an ethnographic relationship with students on the same campus where one is a teacher. Even more surprisingly, only on page 90 the reader is informed that the author herself is a descendant of migrants who "two generations earlier [...] had arrived in the United States without legal documentation". Given the importance of personal life stories for her research design, *Learning to Lead* would have gained in complexity had she decided to open up earlier and more deeply about the influence of this background on her choice of research area and on her integration process into the undocumented students' movement as an ethnographer.

Nájera's book closes with one of her interlocutors' graduation, just a few months after the first election of Donald Trump as the President of the United States. When reading about the anxiety coupled with determination that spread among migrant communities after the result, one cannot help but think of the similarity to present day politics that, once again, force undocumented inhabitants of the US to organize against mass deportations and the criminalization of their very existence. In this context, *Learning to Lead* is an essential call to create safe spaces and not to let universities become engulfed in the dehumanization of migrants that is currently spreading way beyond Trump's America.