

Children of Immigrants

By

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A creative project submitted to

Sonoma State University

in partial fulfillment for the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

English

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May 3, 2020

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Date: April 30, 2020

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Abstract

Statement of Intent: The intent behind *Children of Immigrants* is to give a voice to people who are Latinx, Chicanx, or Mexican in a country which constantly shapes our narratives to benefit the Anglo-American narrative. By writing about the culture, religion, relationship dynamics, and the clash of between Mexican and American societies, I hope to give the reader an authentic perspective of the Mexican/Latinx/Chicanx experience.

Scope: The scope of *Children of Immigrants* is always through the eyes of someone who is Mexican/Latinx/Chicanx. Everything about the characters in these poems is a reflection of the Mexican/Latinx/Chicanx and, by extension, people who interact with this identity.

Approach: Because the purpose of *Children of Immigrants* is to illustrate an authentic Mexican/Latinx/Chicanx experience, my approach was to mimic and write about situations and locations that helped build a foundation to this experience. This included incorporating the Spanish language, including real locations, and writing with politically charged themes. Many of the experiences I wrote about come from my personal life or tales told by friends, family members or the news.

Acknowledgements

The completion of *Children of Immigrants* would not have been possible without the assistance and involvement of the entire Sonoma State English Department faculty and professors. I am extremely grateful for all of their contributions. I would like to express a deep appreciation to the following people:

Kathleen Winter for being my primary mentor during the composition of this poetry collection. The completion of *Children of Immigrants* would not have been possible without her.

Anne Goldman for being my second reader, but also for continuously enlightening my knowledge all those years I had her as a professor.

Megan McIntyre for showing me an extreme amount of compassion and endless support. Without her I would not have the confidence to write about my identity.

Gillian Conoley for being crucial in my development as a poet, but also for her endless support for my work and me.

Finally, to my parents and grandparents for supporting me all these years and for teaching me to see the beauty in our culture.

“Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate.”— Gloria Anzaldúa

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Introduction to Children of Immigrants

The core of *Children of Immigrants* is a celebration of the struggles both Mexicans and Chicax face as they attempt to integrate themselves with the American culture. This work was initially inspired by the negative depictions President Donald J. Trump and company are constantly narrating to the public. As a result, I wanted to further explore how Mexican and American societies portray the Chicax/Mexican identity. My goal with this creative thesis project was to draw parallels and differences between the two societies as an attempt to show the complicated duality of being Chicax. I also wanted to take back the narrative from the people who seem to categorize immigrants with one-word labels and show them there is complexity behind the immigrants they decided to insult. Some of the literary inspirations I looked to while working on *Children of Immigrants* included Gary Soto, Jimmy Santiago Baca, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Claudia Rankine, all poets who explore how their identity is in constant clash with mainstream American society and criticize the inequalities they have experienced.

The inspiration for the title of *Children of Immigrants* comes from the song “El Hijo del Pueblo” (or “The Son of the Town” in English), composed by Jose Alfredo Jimenez and made popular by Vicente Fernandez. “El Hijo del Pueblo” is considered an anthem among the working class in Mexico because it talks about taking pride in labor, being part of the middle to lower class, and being Mexican (“a proud son of his people”). Originally, I was going to name this collection of poems “Sons of Immigrants” (or “Hijos de Inmigrantes”) as a play on “El Hijo del Pueblo,” but with the English title in mind, I didn’t want to exclude all the Chicax/Mexicans who don’t identify as male. Instead, I

chose to replace “sons” with “children” to include a greater group of people, as the Spanish translation of the title remains intact. The primary reason why I chose to name my collection after this song is because *Children of Immigrants* discusses many of the same issues as the song and both end with being proud of being Mexican. I also wanted my Spanish speaking readers to think of the songs as they read the entirety of *Children of Immigrants*.

One of the first steps in exploring the Mexican identity was to think of situations where the Mexican identity was present. From my perspective, this includes key areas such as jobs, relationships, and other types of environments. These poems were about capturing the essence of these moments: the smells of the open markets, the noises of the streets, the way the body reacts and the emotions of the people. These sensory details give the reader an authentic scope of what these places were like and gives the characters in these poems a tinge of realism. With this in mind, I thought integrating the Spanish language was crucial in keeping these experiences as authentic as possible. Having learned Spanish as my first language, I know how important it is to integrate Spanish into a work that is about the Mexican culture. And while my target audience includes both people who speak Spanish and people who do not, I decided to translate the Spanish poems to English in order to include the English-speaking readers.

Now my process for displaying Mexican identity in the United States was different than how I displayed Mexican identity in Mexico. While situations like jobs, relationships, and environments could still be explored, I primarily focused on how Anglo-Americans and U.S. citizens treated and viewed the Mexican identity. In order to capture the societal view of Mexican identity, I had to show situations where Anglo-

Americans and Chicana/Latina characters interacted with one another. Poems like “The ‘American’ Girl at the Bar” and “Running like Latin Lovers Run” feature a narrator who is Chicana/Mexican, but emphasize the narrator’s interactions with Anglo-Americans. There are still poems which center on the Mexican experience in the United States, however the change from Mexico to the United States also forced me to change the focus from the immigrant/Mexican to some of the interactions between U.S. citizen/Anglo-American and Chicana/Mexicans.

Once the core of this project was resolved, I decided to take some language liberties with the writing process. I knew from the beginning of writing *Children of Immigrants* that I wanted to implement code-switching as a way to show the clash of two languages and cultures, but I wanted to experiment further and challenge myself to write in ways and formats I was not familiar with. This discomfort ironically came in the form of translating poems from English to Spanish or Spanish to English. Now to be completely sincere, this was not the first time I wrote in Spanish, or at least attempted to, but what is distinct here is the back and forth between writing in English and writing in Spanish.

Oftentimes I would start a poem in Spanish and somewhere along the line there would be an English translation before the Spanish version was finished. Another example of this code-switching experimentation was writing one line or one stanza in Spanish and the next line or stanza in English. While I ended up translating most poems to one language, a good portion of poems did retain code-switching. Overall, the difficulty in shifting back and forth was my lack of knowledge of Spanish grammar. Much of the time I was looking up Spanish grammar lessons online or seeking advice

from my parents or Spanish-speaking relatives. In an ironic way, my writing process reflected the duality Chicax are forced to comprehend about identity and language.

Continuing with the creative choices, the separation of *Children of Immigrants* into two parts was made to draw a clear distinction between the two cultures, but was also done to imitate the migration from the homeland into the foreign land. By having the reader start out in Mexico, they essentially experience the migration within this work. This is also why the first poem of each part has a different tone. While the part in Mexico begins with “Hijos de Inmigrants”, a poem written to empower Chicax or Mexican, “Uni-vision” is meant to make the readers feel unwelcomed as the collection crosses sections (or borders). I wanted to show the closed arms welcome immigrants often experience when they are on the northern part of the border.

Another reason why the collection is divided in two parts is to create a sense of alienation from the Spanish language. Now both parts do include Spanish; however, the inclusion of Spanish is most apparent in the first part of the collection. I did this to add authenticity to the location, but I also wanted to add a level of discomfort and alienation to the readers who do not speak or read Spanish. By having Spanish in poems like “El Jaripeo del 23 de Enero”, “La Advertencia del Carnicero” and “Outskirts of Indaparapeo” the reader gets an understanding of what it would be like if they were actually in Mexico, and is made aware of some of the experiences Mexicans encounter when they do not speak or read English. By including a sense of alienation from Spanish, Chicax who do not know how to read or speak Spanish will have an authentic experience of how their Chicaxness clashes with Mexican expectations. On the other hand, with the language

barrier, I am hoping Anglo-Americans can sympathize with all the immigrants who either cannot speak English or have a hard time speaking English.

The final element of *Children of Immigrants* that I will discuss is the use of pronouns. The use of second person pronouns in *Children of Immigrants* was inspired by Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*, where she uses second person pronouns to both alienate and include the reader depending on the narrative she is telling in her poems. In poems like "The Labyrinth of el Norte" and "Salinas, California" I used second person pronouns to draw the reader into the experience. It is no longer a random immigrant doing the work or crossing the border, but the reader. I hope to help the reader understand the struggles and pains immigrants have to encounter when crossing the border or going to work. Second person pronouns are included to paint a detailed picture of what the immigrant experience is like on a day to day life.

While *Children of Immigrants* was initially inspired by the hate some people have expressed towards immigrants, the genuine sentiment behind this *Children of Immigrants* goes beyond needing to prove those people wrong. *Children of Immigrants* is a celebration of the Mexican identity. Whether someone is Chicana, Mexican, or American, these poems are meant to showcase the beauty of Mexican culture in all its glory and struggles. From walking down la plaza to the Day of the Dead to Catholicism and even working in a strawberry field, these moments are what define the Mexican identity. And while some readers may note the portrayal of some Americans in a negative light, I did not write those poems to insult or cause further division. Instead, my poems were written to shed light on some of the racism Mexicans experience; the poems attempt to educate Americans/ U.S citizens who do not understand the damage these actions have

on immigrants or people from a Mexican/ Latinx background. Ultimately, I wrote *Children of Immigrants* to pay homage to my identity, give a voice to the immigrants who are silenced, and to inspire—as Soto, Baca, Anzaldúa and Rankine inspired me—other Latinx/Chicanx writers to share their work. Like Jose Alfredo Jimenez wrote in “El Hijo del Pueblo”, “Yo compongo mis [poemas] pa' que el pueblo me las cante y el día que el pueblo me falle ese día voy a llorar.”

Part 1: Mexico

Children of Immigrants

Cuauhtémoc descendant kids.
 Aztec kids. Mestizo kids. Mayan kids.
 Kids the color of umber dirt—
 uniform of imprisonment.
 Shades of sand kids.
 Kids with conquistador blue irises.
 Kids who are forced to learn English—
 creators of Spanglish.

Alienated kids.
 “Oh your father is undocumented” kids.
 Kids who the white man calls “wetbacks”.
 “Watch out for the police” kids.
 “Go back to your country” kids.
 Kids who are murdered by hate.
 Kids held in quarantine in Arizona or Florida.

First generation college student kids.
 “I’m a DACA recipient” kids.
 Bilingual kids who want their children
 to speak Spanish.
 Kids that belong to el pueblo.
 Kids who wear their culture on their sleeves.
 Kids who hope writing about la raza
 will make other kids of immigrants believe—

Si se puede.

Hijos de Inmigrantes

Hijos descendientes de Cuauhtémoc.
Hijos Aztecas. Hijos Mestizos. Hijos Mayas.
Hijos del color de la tierra oscura—
uniforme de prisión.
Hijos con el matiz de arena.
Hijos con irises azules del conquistador.
Hijos obligados a aprender Inglés
creadores de Spanglish.

Hijos alienados. "Oh tu padre es indocumentado" hijos.
Hijos a quienes el hombre blanco llama "mojado".
"Cuidate con la policía" hijos.
"Vuelve a tu país" hijos.
Hijos asesinados por odio.
Hijos detenidos en cuarentena en Arizona o Florida.

Hijos universitarios de primera generación.
"Soy un receptor de DACA" hijos.
Hijos bilingües que quieren a sus hijos
hablan Español.
Hijos que pertenezco a el pueblo.
Hijos que llevan su cultura en la manga.
Hijos que esperan que al escribir sobre la raza
hará que otros hijos de inmigrantes crean—

Si se puede.

The Wait Before Arriving at Indaparapeo

My cheekbone on the arm of a bench,
 grief has placed abuelita in an empty airport lobby.
 White walls sit like bare canvas
 waiting for her face to be painted by nostalgia.
 The rum I poured into my father's
 old coffee mug has taken my ears captive.
 Undulating murmurs
 from cracks of wooden doors
 sound like her voice

Hasta luego mijo.

In front of me
 a portrait of an old man
 catches my attention.
 He holds his weary lips in a frown,
 wrinkles awkwardly spaced
 at the corner of his eyelids.
 Abuelita used to wear
 those same folds before she grazed
 her umber hands below my chin

Cuidate.

She'd walk a couple of meters ahead,
 her tired little feet shuffling heavily side to side.
 On the reflection of tiled floor,
 her body cowered lower as she created distance.
 Slowly disappearing from the plane,
 She'd give one final glance back

*Por favor llamame,
 No te olvides de mi.*

Outskirts of Indaparapeo (Spanish version)

Pain resurrects in a long ride,
a bumpy route,
a narrow lane.
A travesty with no remorse
or patience.
The taxi driver's tongue
stutters as he tries to tell a story.
He gestures towards the open
space in front of a liquor store.
A parking lot without lines
only sand and dust.
An area where the ground is burnt.
Decorated crosses,
dried lilies,
saints stickered
onto candle jars.
He takes a prolonged gulp
a pause to clear his throat
“Los Narcos quemarnos
a tres muchachos
vivos en su troca.
Dicen que los muchachos
tenían fama
de vender
marijuana.”
He stops his voice,
makes us sit
with the sorrow
felt in the car.
Brings his arm
to cover his pale face:
“Pero yo no creo ese rumor
porque yo le enseñe a mi hijo
a ser mejor que ese tipo de gente.”

Outskirts of Indaparapeo (English version)

Pain resurrects in a long ride,
a bumpy route,
a narrow lane.
A travesty with no remorse
or patience.
The taxi driver's tongue
stutters as he tries to tell a story.
He gestures towards the open
space in front of a liquor store.
A parking lot without lines
only sand and dust.
An area where the ground is burnt.
Decorated crosses,
dried lilies,
saints stickered
onto candle jars.
He takes a prolonged gulp
a pause to clear his throat
“The narcos burned
three boys alive
in their truck.
They say the boys
were known for selling
marijuana.”
He stops his voice,
makes us sit
with the sorrow
felt in the car.
Brings his arm
to cover his pale face:
“But I don’t believe this rumor
because I taught my son
to be better than those types of people.”

Sober in the Back Pew of a Church

In the dusk of Sunday,
Spanish prayers coalesce in the air,
exhaling out the breath of a wino
who calls everyone "cabron."
Lupe, the military wife
who cheats on her husband
with any fresa,
pounds her chest in penance.
To her right,
a homosexual bites his bottom lip
so his mouth won't follow
the rote psalm.
The sister who knows his secret
smiles every time the priest
tells everyone to regret their sins.
At the corner of the church's corridor
you'll find a vagabond scooping holy water
to guzzle his thirst.
Perhaps the deacon will bump into him,
ask him to kneel down for the final crossing,
to notice the choir's hollowed out guitar,
how the chorus falls into the background
to fill the building with voices of the devoted.

Plaza de Miguel Hidalgo

Sharp odor of papaya
in hot wind.

Stray dogs
gnaw on

meatless bones.
The Market's

blind man sings
La Bamba for change.

Today's bargain
is the flavor

of cut watermelon in red cups.
Seasoned with *Tajin*

children's small
hands wave

in excitement.
Their legs

strut in cadence
like the sound

of cookware vendors'
gimmicky voices.

Humidity is thick.
The covers of pirated

DVDs grey
on a cardboard stand.

A drunkard's
vertigo speaks

"Oye, vato
no tienes motta?"

He gets a cigarette
instead. The concrete path

is ruddy. Cracks.
Potholes. Weeds.

Faded blood stains lead.
The butcher's hands

strike a pig's belly.
Quickly maneuvering

his blade to slice
meat into square shapes.

His mouth fixed
with a stolid no

whenever he is asked:
"No seas malo

Me das un descuento?"

La Advertencia del Carnicero

Primo,
En la tierra del desierto de la muerte,
los cuerpos estaban ardiendo.
En todas partes luces azules y rojas
alumbraba a los espectadores.
El suministro de agua
del camión de bomberos
se derrumba como lágrimas
histéricas de las madres.
No hubo conmoción
en bocas vivas,
solo el silbido
de brasas moribundas,
el miedo estoico al crimen narcótico
estando presente en el pueblo.
Otros tres adolescentes
flameados en señales de advertencia.
Solamente por vender marihuana
durante la hora del Diablo.

Primo,
tu tienes la suerte
para salir de Indapas.
Vete. Ve y nunca vuelvas.
Nunca vuelvas
a esta ciudad de mierda.

Warning from a Butcher

Primo,
In the desert land of death,
bodies were burning.
Everywhere blue and red lights
beamed bystanders' faces.
The fire truck's water supply
poured out like mothers' hysterical tears.
There was no tumult
in living mouths,
only the hissing sound
of dying embers,
the stoic fear of narco crime
was present in el pueblo.
Another three teenagers
blazed into warning signs.
Only for selling marijuana
during the Devil's hour.

Primo,
you have the chance
to get out of Indapas. Leave.
Leave and never come back.
Never come back
to this piece of shit town.

El Jaripeo del 23 de Enero

El grito of belligerent drunks comes down from the highest seats to welcome the crowd below. Men and women and chaotic little kids look for somewhere to sit (preferably with shade). The rising stairs of cement are littered with empty bags of chips, cascada de garbanzos, and spilled tequila. A child in a cowboy outfit stalks empty beer cans his Apá has thrown onto the lower bench. He looks away to avoid a glare, pretends to take a swig, not noticing his Ama standing behind. On the third row a Chicana (who the locals call Gringa) sways and tilts her body to the trumpet sound of la banda. The worn slurred hands of el jinete grip the girl's curves mientras zapatea. As a 4 pm shadow casts over, drums are banged to interrupt the havoc, announcing the arrival of los toros. Each corpulent beast with marks of rope on its neck fighting and wrestling any tug or pull of the ranchers before caging. Inside the chute, stagnation will spike el cuerpo del toro with desperation. El jinete smacking el toro's fat sides as he steps on oxidized bars to top its body. The gate is suddenly opened—every leap or surge leads the multitude to cheer with a guzzle or a drunken brawl or a fist in the air. Until fall of night, when the alcoholics and the women make their way to la plaza, and el jinete's pride feels defeat or la Gringa on top of him.

Conversations with Doña Maria

The aroma of cooked cactus
and boiled beans caresses nostrils.
I can hear how your voice
tethers me to our Mestizo blood,
how each Spanish word you speak
is the accent of a dying indigenous tongue.
Your hands in rote stern motion,
rolling masa with your calloused palms.
Smacking the bulk flat
over the blazing comal.
You turn around to ask me
the amount I want,
an amber hand maneuvering
pots hissing, flipping tortillas
after one side has streamed brown.
Reaching for a wooden spoon,
you place food onto a porcelain plate.
You sit next to me asking
“Como te van en los estudios.
Necesitas ayuda con algo?”
to which I lie,
“No Ama, todo esta bien.
No necesito ayuda.”

When I Drink I Think of God

I lie on the lamented floor
after a night of drinking,
eyelids in open arcs imagining
the entrance of a church.
Where brittle stone saints
will sharply stare,
taunt the guilty for their sins.
Those whose quietness is held
between hands in prayer,
of wrought and calloused fingers
fixed upon themselves.
When elder women will wear black veils,
and the virgin girls will model dull long skirts.
The stiff bodies of horny young men
will be hitched against oak benches.
On the second row, I will see my parents.
My father with his expected stoic gaze.
Focused to give all his attention to God,
to never slur any word that could offend
in his praise.
My mother's face will be more tender,
her devotion, heard in her soft voice.
She will be apologizing to God
for my absence,
asking him to quench my thirst.

Altars and Sugar Skulls

Sorrow carries
a bright marigold
in the palm.
Fingertips hold
the thickness
of its petals.
Pollen tucked
beneath the shells
of dirty nails,
and in the folds
throughout skin.
One hand grasping
the stem, twirling its core
to mold against the flesh.
Until the end of prayer.
Until the end
of the trailing stillness.
They say the dead are to be
remembered with beauty.
Let go of the flower,
let it lie on the altar.

Sing and Don't Cry

I keep myself awake
through the night,
a marble body of Christ
hanging
 next to the window.
I'm holding the black rosary
my mother gave me
 between my fingers.
Slowly exhaling unease
 past the edge
 of my lips.
Mumbling rote verses,
the following silence
 tastes like rind
 of apologies.
Sits there arresting
 my tongue,
shutting my teeth
 until my jaw
 clenches.
I'm left
 speechless
with all my unforgiven faults.

*(Mijo si tú rezarás más seguido
no te sentirías tan mal.)*

Laboring Hands

Tanned by afternoon blaze,
a boy's hands lay
a wooden shovel on the ground.
Slow in raising his arm
he wipes off the dust-stained sweat
glossing his face.
Soil decorates his white shirt
like dye and
his twelve-year-old gaze
dulls with parcela labor.

As he reaches out
for a welcoming gesture,
I notice his palm is worn.
His skin covered with what Ama calls
"marcas de un hombre".

Blisters turned into permanent calluses.
Cuts and scars making the flesh hard
numbing the pierce of splinters.
A rite of passage only experienced
when the father of the house is gone
when there are three younger sisters
to care for and a mother with a drug addiction.

Before picking up his shovel again
he tells me with a smile "Oye tio, tus manos
son suaves como las manos de una mujer."

The Labyrinth del Norte

How easily the desert fatigues you,
hot air swallowed with each heave.
The only conversation in these lands
is your stomach growling.

Your body moves uphill,
steps heavy like leg weights.
Staring at the distance,
the shade of a lonely mesquite tree
waits for you on top.
A mirage of water
tempts your drowsy eyes.

In this blistering sun,
you hold your empty
jug of water by the handle.
Pretend it's your daughter's hand.
Remember how four of her
fingers fit on your palm
when she dragged you to the playground.

In the vertigo of heat,
your mind makes
arid ground shake.
One knee collapses on dead dirt.
You think about getting up
brushing the dust off your psyche,
but the land is familiar.
Solid like the concrete
in la plaza.
Its ruddy lines piercing
the right knee cap.

You remember the last
time you did this pose.
A black ring box
and your imbecilic voice
asking Dolores
"Te casas conmigo."

Under the afternoon blaze,
fatigue restricts you like barbed wires.
You hear the sirens of la migra
make their way into the background.
A helicopter chopping warm air
with men staring at the horizon,
you surrender.

Brown Skinned

If the shade of my skin
foreshadows the future,
then honor me like a hero.

Treat me like the king whose sun
incinerates those who are not capable
of seeing true beauty.
Who sell their souls
just to lighten up
the shade of gold
the metizo gods have meticulously painted
from the depths of the soil
where the blood of our ancestors has fallen.

Treat me like a deity whose body
lies inside the Aztec temples
placed at the center of Mexico City.
Who's given birth to a culture
drowned in infinite riches,
exploited by those who don't have
the royal creed flowing
within the blood of their veins.

Treat me like royalty,
for my eyes glitter a bronze color
only found in the chambered
treasures of Mesoamerica,
(the real America)
and my hair glints silvery black strands
of sculpted planetary elegance.

Treat me like the idol
you have seen fight for the right of his land
and die for a freedom
you so maliciously denied.

Treat me like a legend,
for all the segregated lies
and discriminative labels
my people have undone
just so I can stand tall next to my truth.

But most importantly treat me like an equal,
for my people are too humble
to ever recognize the historic grandeur
living within our golden skin.

Part II: The United States

Uni-vision

The language of television tonight is racism the President is telling
 brown people we have the profile of degenerates convincing others we
 lurk with the stealth of thugs in white neighborhoods
 too criminal to walk under dim lights somewhere on the front of a display
 there are images of brown children captive behind wire cages their
 silhouettes bent in solitude hollow-eyed bearing the fear of their father's
 faces.

This concludes our evening broadcast and now for our national anthem.

When we turn off our screens we are forced to sit with dark
 reflections.

All the fears and trauma behind the off-screen script:

You don't belong in this country.

The “American” Girl at the Bar

She rushes at the exit door
pushes the door handle
with her fat hands.
Jolts a couple of steps
until feet are fixed
at the borderline
of a wooden porch
and concrete.
Guzzles a whisk of *Corona*.
yells to a couple
of Latina girls across the street.
“Fuck your pesos.
Go back to your country.”
The two friends following her
grab her by arms and shirt
and wrestle with her
until she stops.
As she struggles for a breath,
the corner of her eye catches our gaze.
Notices our skin is the color
of the plywood she’s stepping on.

“You know, my friend’s friend is Mexican,
I like your people.”
“Do you have a cig?”

She gets silence.

A Minor in Spanish: A Short Narrative

Summer labor drips its sweaty touch, waiting for a breeze. Air never comes inside this mobile bottling line. Only the gentle whistle of gossip teases.

“Si vas a ir la pueblo este año, Sofia?”, my co-worker Gabby asks.

“La neta Gabby, no se. Quiero ir, pero Gerardo y yo queremos comprar una casa la fin de este año” Sofia answers. Before I hear Gabby’s response, I feel my mind swing its attention like a pendulum. On one side, Sofia’s voice fading into gibberish, on the other, the noise of wine caps being compressed onto filled bottles. I plan my mental escape for the day: in fifteen minutes, I will imagine the sand beneath my bare feet. The ocean waves colliding with my chest. How I will sit on a beach towel and enjoy not working during the summer. At around two, when my lips dry, I will imagine the owner, Ted, coming into the trailer, drunk, and giving us a bottle to guzzle. Speaking of the devil:

“Hola chicas como les va?” he says in a thick American accent.

“Bien Ted” Sofia and Gabby reply in a synchronized manner.

“Hey Esteban, how’s it going? Jesus Christ this heat is brutal.”

“Hey Ted, I know, right! I feel like I sweated enough to fill a couple of these wine bottles,” I joke.

Ted smirks. “Bottlerock is this weekend, are you planning on going?”

“Honestly Ted, I don’t know who half the artists are. Maybe if there were at least two or three that I knew, I would go” I lie. This man is barely paying me enough to cover my college expenses next semester. How am I supposed to fork over three hundred dollars just to listen to some band sing about chicken fried and beer?

“Oh yeah, that’s true,” he acknowledges. “Most of the bands performing are for us older folks. Anyway, how’s school going? Are you still studying psychology?” he asks.

“Yeah I am, I still have another two years left. I also decided to get a minor in Spanish, you know, to help me build a nice-looking resume” I say excitedly.

“Oh, a minor in Spanish?” Ted reacts with surprise. “But isn’t getting a minor in Spanish like— cheating?”

I feel my face making an involuntary expression of puzzlement but I stay silent. I don’t know what to say. Like, is it cheating? No, wait, people who speak English get Bachelor degrees in English all the time.

Ted continues, “Yeah, if you can speak the language fluently wouldn’t you just be getting easy A’s in every class?”

“I suppose” I reply timidly.

“Yeah, I don’t think it’s fair for you to have an advantage like that,” Ted says confidently.

I don’t reply. Instead, I turn my body around and pretend to notice the capper machine still going despite having nothing to compress. Ted takes this interruption as the end of the conversation.

“Alright Esteban, I’m going to get out of this sauna. Let me know if you need anything.”

Again, I don’t reply. In my mind, I begin to replay every second, every word said in our conversation. Looking for the perfect moment when I could have told Ted: Quit thinking less of my people, puto.

Running like Latin Lovers Run

I ran through
the rich side of town.

My tanned
sweaty body
gleaming.

Brawny calves
flexing with every stride.

Jaws clenched
to endure
the uphill struggle.

When she catcalled
through the car window

she looked directly
into my brown eyes.

Moved her wrinkled
lips to say:

“There aren’t many
people like you
in this neighborhood,
but my oh my
are you gorgeous.
You aren’t like the rest of them.”

After her interruption
I ran faster.

Out of the Blue

Under streetlights,
where my body earned
contempt, I was an animal.

Stagnant and on my knees,
I listened, not to the men in blue,
but for the sound of gunshots.

Afraid to look directly
at the pointed muzzle,
I closed my eyes.

Welcomed the priceless dark
without protest.
My silence wasn't enough

to buy my body from the frisking,
the beating on my ribs,
the red they left dripping

from my broken nose—
the sign this hunt
was a mere catch and release.

The Death of a Wild Tongue

Afraid of the immigrant
echo in my speech,
I learned to hide behind
an unfamiliar language.
Tamed my dialect to avoid
being called slurs pronounced by the KKK.
Chants that synchronize like straight arms
pointing towards rioting winds.
Burning crosses in the middle
of sallow lawns.
You might find the twisted lip
of Emmett Till still scorched
underneath ashes.
Or the gun that chalked Amilcar Perez-Lopez
into an outline carried on the pockets
of their white robes.
Perhaps, as you search
for another corpse
within the surrounding trees,
you'll see a tethered rope slashed,
my name carved on the trunk.
Hear a Spanish whisper hanging
by its native thread.
Alone in its death,
ashamed its coward body fled.

Arriving to Mare Island Tech Academy

Friday morning's thick
mist floats over
Whitney Avenue.
A junkie's sleepy body
rests on the community
center building.

You walk through the dewy grass
to shortcut the travel.
Tip toeing like soldiers
through landmines,
you try to avoid stepping
on dog shit and used condoms.

There are other students
making the same trip,
kids whose clothes are either faded
or ripped.
Stained with grass or grape drink
the local laundromat
couldn't wash out.

Near Olympic Drive
a drug dealer sits
on his porch searching
for any lonely kids
to pitch his product.
Stay at home mothers
watch wearily.

The road turns bumpy
upon proximity.
Musk of Loma Vista
farm animals
are the welcoming smell.
The sight of metal fences
mimicking cell bars
are the eyes' ken—

you are a prisoner
of America's ghetto.

Ode to the Brown Boys with Red or Blue Bandanas

To the pride and manliness of my homies,
loyal in their kinship, aggressive like boars.

They flower the streets with memorials—
brave to die for the pride of a color

or be put away in windowless cells.
Their hustle isn't found

with the sound of pencils sharpening.
It's hidden in el barrio

away from blue and red sirens,
in poorly gardened backyards.

It's hidden in the quick buck
they make to survive.

To the vigilant and stoic eyes of my brothers,
comfortable in their silence, fearless like badgers.

They decorate the hood with graffiti—
artistic in leaving a legacy.

Their sketches make their way
onto buildings and bridges

escaping imprisonment and death
that seem to run in our indigenous veins.

To the comras who didn't see a day past twenty-one,
this poem is for you.

Mi Padre Mexicano

Sometimes I ask my father
how it feels to be a man.
To have the rind of Earth
forged into his eyes.
Wear the strong odor of sweat
and immigrant over his body.
Bear his arms with the weight
of granite stone labor,
undocumented slurs.
Construct a road for a neighborhood
whose tenants don't want his son
to ever walk through.
And how he finds the strength to suffer
through it again.

Sometimes I ask my father
how to be a man:

“Teniendo huevos hijo,
teniendo huevos.”

Salinas, California

Thick humidity over the strawberry field
Back hunched, you drag
boots.

Gardening gloves don't ease
they serve as cloth

Eight hours on hard ground
and the blazing dirt cooks

The musk of cow manure

The navy bandana you wear
or stop your skin from getting browner.

and el patron gives your daily cash,
is only worth six dollars an hour.

sweat drips off your moving elbows.
a basket closer to your faded work

the sting of blisters on your palms—
for when the fluid drains.

makes your bent knees ache
the soles of your feet.

upsets your empty stomach.

doesn't cover the smell

When the day ends,
you remember your alien body

Palabras de Un Padre

No me preguntes como
las hojas se vuelven rojas en otoño,
que los coyotes estan a punto
de aullar y si no me duermo
antes que la luna llena adorne
la noche, no me lavantere
a tiempo para ir a trabajar.

No se te olvide lavar
los trastes antes de que llegue
de trabajar, que mi cuerpo
pesado a penas se puede
sostener y mi espalda
me mata de dolor
si estoy de pie por mucho tiempo.

No se te olvide lo que hice
para que tu tuvieras un futuro mejor,
todavía siento el calor grueso
del desierto, mis labios agrietados
y el olor del sudor penetrar
las cortadas en mi piel.

No se te olvide llamarme
de vez en cuando.
Hijo yo se que estas ocupado,
pero no sabes lo amargo
que se siente esta soledad.
No tengo a nadie que me
ayude a rastrillar las hojas
rojas que caen en el patio.
Regresa pronto.

Words of a Father

Don't ask me how
the leaves turn red in autumn,
for the coyotes are close to howling
and if I don't fall asleep
before the full moon adorns
the night, I won't get up
in time for work.

Don't forget to wash the dishes
before I arrive home from work,
you know my weary body
barely holds up and my back
kills me with pain
if I stand for too long.

Don't forget what I've done
so you could have a better future.
I still feel the thick heat
from the desert, my chapped lips
and the smell of sweat permeating
the cuts on my skin.

Don't forget to call me
occasionally.
Hijo, I know you're busy,
but you don't know how bitter
this loneliness feels.
I have no one to help me
rake the red leaves
falling on the patio.
Come home soon.

Mission Street, 2006

Today's afternoon traffic is stagnant. There are irritated complaints escaping out of car windows. On a bus stop bench, cholos gather. They all wear oversized clothes and tipped fitted caps. Walk slowly enough, you can feel their glare never leave your body. At the end of the block, a Mexican convenience store models bright yellow and pink piñatas. The kids coming out cry and whine to their parents. There's reggaeton music playing among high school cliques traveling. On 24th Street corridors, murals fill the eye's horizon. Olive faces shaded to look like the descendants of Emiliano Zapata. Indigenous women are painted in holy stances with rebozos over their black hair like la Virgen de Guadalupe. A beer-bellied man guzzles a forty ounce of Mickey's at the end of the alley. As you walk further down Mission, a stand of colorful luchador masks catches your irises. And the sharp smell of asada grilled makes you salivate. You hear Spanish being spoken out loud like it's America's main language—a reminder this country can still feel like home.

Tacos on a Saturday

“Número seven your orden ready”

Doña Clara's taco truck
has an insipid environment.
A line of people dressed
in business suits
are in a collective blinding
of illuminated iPhone screens.
The grey coat of the truck's
exterior promotes lingering yawns.
Oak picnic tables fade
in the background with
each “Can I get it to go.”

Doña Clara's taco truck is silent.
There's no chisme whispered by customers.
Nor does el paletero come to ding
his bell before yelling “Paletas! Paletas!”.
The cholos who used to sit on the tables
are imprisoned. And the jornaleros
who waited near the Mission Street sign
have been kicked out.

Doña Clara's taco truck is empty.
There's nothing. Nothing.
Nothing left of la raza.
A container of ripe jalapeños
is left untouched
and the salsa squeeze bottles
are now filled with “guac”.
What's worse,
the menu is now
in language my mother doesn't read.

Tacos are one dollar off on Taco Tuesdays

The Remnants of Machismo

- I. sunken-eyed, i played a game with myself
during my abuelito's funeral:
a swig of tequila every time
tia Tina breaks down
while the rest of us pray

- II. thinking i was immortal
i downed an entire flask
of whiskey before i performed a poem
about abuelita
felt the sweet burn of sediment
and words on my throat
(the vertigo came after)

- III. sitting in front of a michelada stand
my buzzed body goes numb with beer
primo Omar recollects his youth
like a manifesto shakes his head
in regret every time he talks about coming
to el Norte

- IV. as a ritual, i drink champagne
in an attempt to forget a lover's name
the morning hangover is a reminder
to never fall in love again

V. in the hour of the dead
 i drunkenly cry in front of my father
 i apologize for being an absent son
 he hands me a bottle:
 drink, my son drink.
 drink away the pain

Como tú, yo soy

un observador de estrellas.
Habitante de la opulenta oscuridad.
Ofrezco mi corazón idiota
a las estrellas y la luna.

Como tú, soy gitano,
un viajero de las tierras verdes.
Me deleito en el dulce
olor de lilas y salvia.
La brisa de un cielo azul
es mi única brújula.

Como tú, soy un trabajador laboral.
Escondido en colinas llenas de uva
del país del vino,
respiro el polvo del verano.
Visto las cortadas finas de espinas
en mis dedos
y el sudor en mi espalda
sin descanso.

Como tú, yo he estado de luto.
La muerte ha decorado mis ojos
con brotes de lágrimas.
Oscilaba mi mente entre
pasado y presente,
épocas recordadas cuando
mis seres amados
todavía tocaban con su
carne viva y cálida.

Como tú, soy un luchador.
He marchado por el derecho
de sentirme cómodo
en piel morena.
Luchado con racistas cuyos
palabras pican como las abejas.
Escrito poesía para aquellos
quien mal dicen mi nombre.

Como tú, soy un Chicano,
un portador de la dicotomía.
Mientras la punta de mi lengua
prueba la cultura Americana,
la sangre en mis venas
siempre será Mexicana.

Like you, I am a Chicano,
bearer of dichotomy.
While the tip of my tongue
tastes American culture,
the blood in my veins
will always be Mexican.

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