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ENG 200: Portrait of a Wetback

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Portrait of a Wetback

Is there a moment in time you wish could be turned into a portrait? If there were a way for the moment that would forever define your life to become a portrait, what moment would that be? For Chicana author Erika Sánchez, born in Chicago to parents who immigrated from Mexico, decided her moment in time would be in her poem "Portrait of a Wetback". This poem takes the reader through the feelings of crossing the border from Mexico to the United States. This Poem is about Sánchez's moment in time when her parents crossed the border, leaving behind their lives in search of creating new lives in 'paradise' (line 35) even through the fierce journey they faced. Sánchez employs her family's trauma, references to various mythological elements, and the beauty the United States offers to convey her theme.

Sánchez begins this poem by stating, "You cross the viridian scum / of river -" (Sánchez, 1-2) which brings the question to mind, what river are they crossing? We know that Sánchez's parents crossed the border in 1978 and thanks to Google, I found out they passed through Tijuana (Museum). Therefore, I believe that the "viridian scum of river" being crossed can be considered the Tijuana River for the reason that Tijuana is considered the 'most crossed border in the world,' (Tijuana Travel). Sánchez then goes on to talk about "A walk to the horizon // with bleakness // on your shoulders:" (Sánchez, 5-7) this refers to the walk-through Tijuana and into California with a sort of misery for what they are leaving behind in Mexico to create new lives for their family in the United States. I believe that Sánchez is using this poem to help herself understand more of what her parents went through when they left their lives in Mexico behind. Sánchez then describes "electric-wired fences. // Helicopters circle and circle // above you like buzzards."

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(Sánchez, 10-12) which helps to give readers the ability to visualize the scene her parents traversed through on the journey from Mexico to the United States. As the reader I can imagine being in that desert seeing the fences, then looking above and seeing helicopters circling like birds in the sky. I can even begin to understand what these people went through to create better lives for themselves. In lines eighteen, nineteen, and twenty, Sánchez writes, "You want to preserve this / in a jar of vinegar: the bright skull / of the moon." These lines bring back the idea of a moment in time, a portrait. I don't think Sánchez wants to preserve this particular memory because it was her trauma, but rather because her mother and father – and anyone else who is in the United States due to coming from Mexico – needed to have that reminder of what they have accomplished.

Mythology is used in many different forms of art, in this poem Sánchez chose to use lore to further connect to the journey her parents endured. We read the first use of mythology when Sánchez writes, "Mictlán / place of the fleshless, electric-wired fences." (Sánchez, 8-10). In Aztec mythology, "Mictlán" is known as the underworld (Wikipedia Contributors), which I believe Sánchez is inferring as Mexico because, it was literally under the United States, and two, it was a place they didn't want to be anymore, it was considered "old" and where they were headed was going to be "new". The next reference to the mythology that Sánchez includes in her poem is, "Jaguar, devourer // of the sun." (Sánchez, 16-17) because the "Jaguar" Sánchez refers to is a symbol of "night sun and darkness" and was seen as the ruler of the underworld (Jaguar). The next piece of mythology Sánchez references is:

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"Xolotl, dog-headed man, god // of fire, // drags you through the ragged // hole of a wire-fence." (Sánchez, 25-28)

This reference connects readers to the point in the journey where they have reached the fence connecting Mexico to the United States. She references Xolotl and being dragged through a ragged hole in a wire fence to get a better understanding of what her parents sustained on their journey. Xolotl is known as the god of lightning and fire and a soul guide for the dead ("Xolotl"). Sánchez also mentions "Look, the gods wait for you // on their haunches." (Sánchez, 29-30) which made me ask the question, was she inferring to guards at the border waiting for people to cross?

In this poem, Sánchez talks about a lot of dark and traumatic events that unfolded when her parents came to the United States in 1978. Words like "bleakness", "fleshless", and statements such as "viridian scum", and "desert thirst? // A lit branch // in your throat" (Sánchez, 13-15) allow readers to feel and understand how Mexico made them feel. By the end of the poem though, Sánchez states,

"The lights flash white / and the sirens begin // as your brittle gaze // still skins the beauty // from this paradise." (Sánchez, 31-35)

To convey her message of the United States being beautiful, Sánchez uses these lines. Although she ends the poem by talking about the beauty of the United States and its being a paradise, she doesn't want readers to forget the fretful journey thousands of people have traversed.

To conclude, Sánchez works through her trauma and mental health through her writing, she is a true writer at heart. Erika Sánchez uses stories of her life and how it came to be, to

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capture beautiful moments in time. In this poem, readers get to dive into the feelings of crossing that border, and Sánchez makes that possible through her use of employing her family's trauma, referencing various mythological elements, and the beauty the United States offers to convey her theme. I feel that she truly stepped into her parent's lives as she wrote this poem and could finally understand the pain they endured, but also why they were willing to endure it.

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