

Our painful world

by

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When Fischer talks of inter-reference I roll my eyes
Without understanding this is what I do everyday
Code-switching between two languages
The irony.

My deepest crisis this time, this course, was not being
In tune with
It.

These people I felt were far away from me
With their thankless work in the fields
Their struggle against racism
Their belief in Aztlán and La Raza
In la Virgen de Guadalupe
Things that I did not
See.
Or care for.

But then
I saw their pain

It oozed out of pores

It rolled like a wave

and catapulted them.

Pain I understand as much as the next person.

It is entrenched into my being

Since my mother died.

No, before that.

It is in our genes.

One grandmother lost the newborn she was holding to her chest

because she had to carry wood for the fire.

The other survived a Nazi attack on her village.

Hid underneath the bed. Scared and alone.

Life is pain, for everyone it seems.

For women, especially.

And now,

When Fischer talks or Lomelí or Saldívar

I lend a close ear

For I know

Some things are universal,

No matter where or how one lives

In this painful, our world.

In this poem, I try to express my initial hesitance regarding Chicana/o writings and the Chicana/o experience, in general, which has eventually been overturned. This happened through two realizations; firstly, that pain and struggle are universal and, secondly, that ethnicity is a component of everyone's identity, and how we interact with it reveals a lot about ourselves. As far as the latter realization is concerned, influential in my reading has been Michael M. J. Fischer's analysis of ethnicity and memory, as he argues that,

ethnicity is something reinvented and reinterpreted in each generation by each individual and that it is often something quite puzzling to the individual, something over which he or she lacks control. Ethnicity is not something that is simply passed on from generation to generation, taught and learned; it is something dynamic, often unsuccessfully repressed or avoided. (195)

In my poem, I am inspired by the difficult and life-changing experiences of my two grandmothers but, at the same time, I recognize that culture and ethnicity mean something entirely different to me than it did to them. My generation (at least a number of people belonging to the same generation as me) regards the English language and culture as nearly equivalent to our native one in our everyday lives; it is inherent in the music we listen to, the books we read, the films and series we watch, even the shop signs on the street. We code-switch when talking amongst us. It has become a part of our identity, while elements of our Greek identity have subsided, for better or worse. But this to me is not a loss. It is important to remember where you come from, but also to accept and embrace the future. Fischer states that we need "retrospection to gain a vision for the future" (198), and this is what I tried to enact with this poem. By bringing forth the painful memories of my past, to make clear that they are shared by people with similar ones; that despite differences in culture and language, we have a communal understanding of pain and struggle; and that the future holds more cultural synthesis and inter-reference, not less. What we need to do is find the strength to confront our memories head-on, no matter how painful they are, and this is possible through testimonial writing, as, according to George Yúdice, it "is first and foremost an act, a

tactic by means of which people engage in the process of self-constitution and survival” (19). *By reflecting on and writing about my mother’s death, I tried to engage in this myself. The only way to truly survive is to face our past and move forward.*

Works Cited

- Fischer, Michael M. J. “Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory.” *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, edited by James Clifford and George E. Marcus, U of California P, 1986, pp. 194-233.
- Yúdice, George. “Testimonio and Postmodernism.” *Latin American Perspectives*, vol. 18, no. 3, 1991, pp. 15-31. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2633737. Accessed 28 Apr. 2020.