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English 1B

Spring 2018

Inside a Racialized Labor Economy:

The Dehumanization and Objectification of Minorities

Is a question of strength,  
of unshed tears,  
of being trampled under,   
and always, always,  
remembering you are human.

* Jimmy Santiago Baca

In poems “We’re Caffeinated by Rain Inside Concrete Overpasses”, “Federico’s Ghost”, and “I Could Only Fight Back with My Poem” are about minority speakers who shows great appreciation for their culture but understood that theirs an immense disconnection between the majorities and minorities as the latter are often being dehumanized, objectified, and projected upon due to fear from their insecurities and xenophobia with unfortunately put these speakers’ values at risk. Dehumanization, objectification, and projection are depicted as how the privileged treated minorities that are considered beneath most other races within a racialized labor economy such as the United States’, since it allows the majority to have a stronger control over those minorities while remaining blissed from their ignorance of the hardship and degrading treatment they put these seemingly subhumans under, suggesting these poor conducts that’s placed upon these minorities meant that they were used as a means to achieve and maintain their luxurious lifestyle by overworking them to the point of exhaustion while only seeing them as tools at the same time hide their insecurities through this act.

In “We’re Caffeinated by Rain Inside Concrete Overpasses” by Sesshu Foster, a poet, novelist, and community activist who had won a handful of awards from his written work, where the speaker of his poem depicts a common issue within a racialized labor economy where labor workers who are predominately Mexicans were dehumanized and objectified by their employers. The sense of dehumanization arose when it was mentioned by the speaker who is indeed a labor worker himself: “we wiped our hands on our pants or they did not shake them” (lines 19 – 20). Indicating that employers have a trend of voiding their employees of basic human recognition such as a simply handshake. Despite the fact that it was the employers own filth that made them refrain from said handshake in the first place as evidence can be seen when the speaker accounted that: “we pushed a lawn mower for white people, we got down on our hands and knees in their san marino driveways / fertilizer under our fingernails grown large, yellow and cracked as moons” (lines 4 – 5 & 20 - 21). This piece of evidence also further showed that these labor workers were certainly being objectified by their employers as tools that can be exploited and used up so that those higher up on the racial spectrum can continue their luxurious lives without it being inhibited by the burden of others that kept it intact for them. The speaker also made note of this when he proclaimed that: “they didn’t want to see us, they like nature in rows and flowering things, not another kind of face” (lines 23 – 24). Since according to a research study, the most definitive form of recognition between humans derives from recognizing their faces. Therefore, avoiding someone’s “face” meant that these employers are declaring to themselves that those who work on what they considered be a lower-end job are not worth their acknowledgement of being human. Not to mention that from a quote stated above, it was told that the employees that hire these laborers were mostly white at the same time pointing out the fact that he is not. To further the audience into his notion that Americans do indeed operate within a racialized labor economy, he stated: “with all the Japanese gardeners gone, we’re mexican now” (line 16 – 17). Showing that not only are people being treated poorly by their occupation but also people’s occupations are generally gravitated about their race within the United States’ capitalistic system where Mexicans are considered to be lower than Japanese on the racial spectrum by the privileged .

In “Federico’s Ghost”, by Martin Espada, also describes a labor force that is predominately Mexicans, but with a darker racial climate as the wellbeing of these minority workers are in danger within this poem. The dehumanization of these laborers is this time taken to the sky as it depicted a crop duster who saw so little value in the lives of the “fruitpickers” below him to the point where it desensitized him from the fact that he was killing the works when he decided to pump pesticide directly over them out of his own convenience. The pilot even went to as far as “circled the plane and sprayed again, watching a fine gauze of poison drift over the brown bodies” (Espada). This eventual caused the death of a young gentleman by the named of Federico that ultimately caused a strong sense of retaliation amongst the fruit pickers at the labor camps. Tomatoes were “picked and smashed at night, growers muttering of vandal children” (line 27) in the name of this young boy’s death and for the sake of all those who are still alive as the harsh treatment did not halt even after a loss of a life as the employers was incapable of sympathizing for those they have objectified as tools of profit.

This eventually caused the death of Federico (prior to the poem) where retribution was at a minimal as the fruit pickers were only “promised every Sunday off” after “first threatening to call Immigration” in retaliation towards to revolt of the workers due to the loss of one of their own. Signs of a mediocre improvement only began when the employer’s profit started to hind because of the retribution