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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” (line 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” (line 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” (line 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 well-being 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. However, mediocre signs of improvement only begun when the destruction of the tomatoes started to affect said profit as the speaker had told: “then promising every Sunday if only the smashing of the tomatoes would stop” (line 30 – 31). Rightfully, this did not satisfy the migrant workers as damages done to the tomatoes we’re still secretly committed. Entailed sparked a rumor that it was Federico’s ghost that had caused the vandalism as the friction goes, “the old woman in the cap said it was Federico laboring after sundown to cool the burns on his arms, flinging tomatoes at the crop duster” (line 33 – 37). In other words, not only has the retaliation provided the field workers a bit of their birth given rights to be treated as human beings but in a short amount of time it revitalized “and kept is soul awake” (line 39) Federico as an individual of a cause for justice and human rights along with being a symbol for unity and strength that bought the laborers together and fight. Similar to what Ross Gay had done for the late Eric Gardener in his poem that empowered the Black Lives Matter movement as it brought back Eric Garner as a beneficial individual to society and not the man who was murdered through an illegal choke hold by a city police officer during his arrest.

Moreover, in the poem, “I Could Only Fight Back In My Poetry” by Guillermo Gomez Pena, describes a Mexican speaker who has been projected upon by a seemingly white Texan male, to which the only medium he can use to defend himself is through his poetry. He proclaimed this by explaining his inadequacy for physical contact or verbal reason as said: “so you tried to beat the Meskian out of me of course, since you were a foot taller & 85 lbs heavier & not that skilled in cross-cultural diplomacy I could only fight back in my poetry” (line 7 – 11). He continued to defend himself by calling out his bully’s faults since the speaker is not persecuted for his ‘broken English’ and arrogance but truly he is a victim of projection when he realized: “the real reason you despised me was that your wife was just about to leave you& hit the road to sexy Mexico to escape the Texan nightmare, your inflexible arms, your smelly feet & psychotic eyes so Mexico became the source of all your fears” (line 14 – 18).