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Book Review: Citizen Illegal by José Olivarez

Alfredo Madrid · Wednesday, August 22nd, 2018

José Olivarez
Citizen Illegal
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There appears to be a uniform opinion running through the veins of our modern global populace that poetry has lost its lustre and intrinsic capabilities to produce positive effects upon society at large.

Well, any party or individual who identifies with this ignorant group—perhaps the majority of our confused and transitioning culture—has obviously not picked up a copy of José Olivarez's forthcoming debut volume of verse, *Citizen Illegal*.

It is a rather slim book, a mere 70 pages in length (including a two-page Acknowledgments section), broken up into five fantastic parts. I managed to peruse this short tome during the course of one evening, allotting myself time to enjoy a long ramble in between two cafés in order to soak in Olivarez's expertise at eliciting candor and joy when employing the most beautiful choice in words. His natural power in sculpting language shone through with a rather fierce sheen of light.

There is a new voice that has arisen from the Burning Phoenix of The Chicano/a/Latinx ashes to claim a glory that has hereto been denied to this group of minority members here in America.

"A dozen blankets / couldn't keep me from shivering. / winter is an unavoidable fact. / unless you're from Cali & / i don't trust people who don't know / the freeze of loneliness" (p. 20), croons Olivarez in "Not-Love Is a Season," a personal take on heartbreak where the poet openly expresses his adoration for our flowery southern sector of California.

He continues to develop the emotion of elation in the closing lines, "how love is a season that

begins like a leaf. / when in the dead winter a tree dreams / of a crown it will one day wear" (p.21). Through his masterful demonstration of control over the pen, Olivarez has established himself as not only a voice to be reckoned with and mindful of, but also one that deserves to be respected.

Here we have a poetic-people's-champ confidently displaying the musicality of his unique and distinct metres through the streets and alleyways that the masses traverse. It's almost as if Olivarez, in utilizing an elusive punctuality, has arrived to strike the most gorgeous chords that will signal his coronation to claim the Golden Laurel that is justly his.

A poet never arrives ahead or behind schedule, but rather at just the right moment. Olivarez's tunes have caused the pendulum of our heavenly recesses to reawaken and spur an imagination only a child at play could fathom. In "I Ask Jesus How I Got So White," Olivarez seems to repent at the soles of the Holy Figure when he writes, "…some people want to know if i'm really Mexican. / because i know i'm a questionable narrator / when it comes to my own life, i ask Jesus / how i got so white & Jesus says / man, / i've been trying to figure out the same damn thing myself" (p.36).

In this heartfelt portrayal of our Saviour, he admonishes with a lingo that stems from the 21stCentury, as if The Messiah were a contemporary *muchacho*or *vato*one could find slicing *carne asada*at the local *carniceria* or taco stand.

But, fear not dear reader, for when it comes to employing his formidable arsenal comprised of the spectrum of alphabetical letters, Olivarez does not shy away from attacking our current American political administration.

"Juan, Lupe, Lorena died this way, too, silently / while trump won the presidency & the police / kept killing their Black neighbors & relatives… / asking Black people to die more quietly / asking white people not to turn the gun on us" (p.32).

Through such a basic, yet effectual fashion of crafting verse, Olivarez's tone as an authority figure rises to the surface in a covert manner. His blatant disgust with the pain that is causing the stiches of our country to bleed at the seams, radiates like a refreshing star being born under the careful watch of a Sun grown weary of witnessing an ailing and flailing world's collective deterioration.

There is a common theme that ties the entire book together. It is comprised of a pure Spirituality that is meshed with a sheer vibrancy and immediacy, calling not just the observer, but the public as a whole, to stand up, to do something, anything in this most fragile and uncertain of times.

In "Rumors," he dispels a notion of pure truth when writing, "you know how rumors get born out of spit & breath, but got whole legs / by the time they land, so that's how holding hands becomes hooking up / or pregnant. listen to everything. don't believe anything" (p.11)

By interweaving such informal language into his prose, Olivarez is also addressing our Millennial Generation and perhaps even those to follow, who by no fault of their own, must undertake to shovel our reality out of this grimy, pestilent and murky present. But for all of the tactics that he utilizes in being frank, the articulate poet never loses his poise nor ultimate intent.

In fact, he is able to joke when giving the most stern advice, as in his piece "Sleep Apnea," where he writes, "coffee is how I keep daylight burning / a lemon wedge/ of night sky/ under each eye/ colleagues compliment/ the grind/ the show no tell/ i tug the evening/ behind me/ like a black velvet cape" (p.50).

He mentions the caffeinated beverage three pages later in “Summer Love,” forming a flowing cadence with a unique take on the drink, “like, when you are making coffee, you look up & see / a rifle at your head. / just a split second. / just enough to get your heart rate up” (p. 53).

In staying within the perameters of a Latinx poet of the 21st century, he alludes to other, more appropriate toxins designated as culturally acceptable for many who share his heritage.

In “Mexican Heaven,” he writes, “God threatens to kick / all the Mexicans out of heaven si no paran / con las pendejadas, so the Mexicans drink more / discreetly. they smoke outside where God won’t / smell the weed” (p.56).

But mind altering substances like marijuana and booze aren’t the only items capable of ingestion that Olivarez mentions. He dedicates an entire poem to Latin cuisine in another version of “Mexican Heaven,” as he continues, “tamales. tacos. tostadas. tortas. / pozole. sopes. huaraches. menudo. / horchata. jamaica. limonada. agua” (p. 44).

The pleasant take on humor does not detract from more discreet, yet blatant political attacks, as in “Mexican American Disambiguation—after Idris Goodwin” whereupon the poet summons racial profiling in the closing lines, “with the Mexican American in me, who the colleges love, / but only on brochures, who the government calls / NON-WHITE, HISPANIC or WHITE, HISPANIC, who / my parents call mijo even when I don’t come home so much” (p. 42).

Olivarez’s first official foray into the arena of published verse may best be summarized in a single line taken from “When the Bill Collector Calls & I Do Not Have the Heart to Answer.” The simple, yet poignant selection reads, “is loyalty another word / for fear? Maybe I should grab the phone” (p.39).

In asking us to reconsider the decay of the modern world and view it through a clearer lens, it becomes evident that Olivarez hasn’t lost hope in the humanity still inherent at the core of our values.

Instead, it appears the poet wants us to stand up, to be brave, and perhaps most importantly, to unite under the thread of universal compassion and humility, in order to reaffirm the greatness that life has to offer when we all mesh in sync like the rhythmical and beautiful intonations of his pure and simple words.

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