

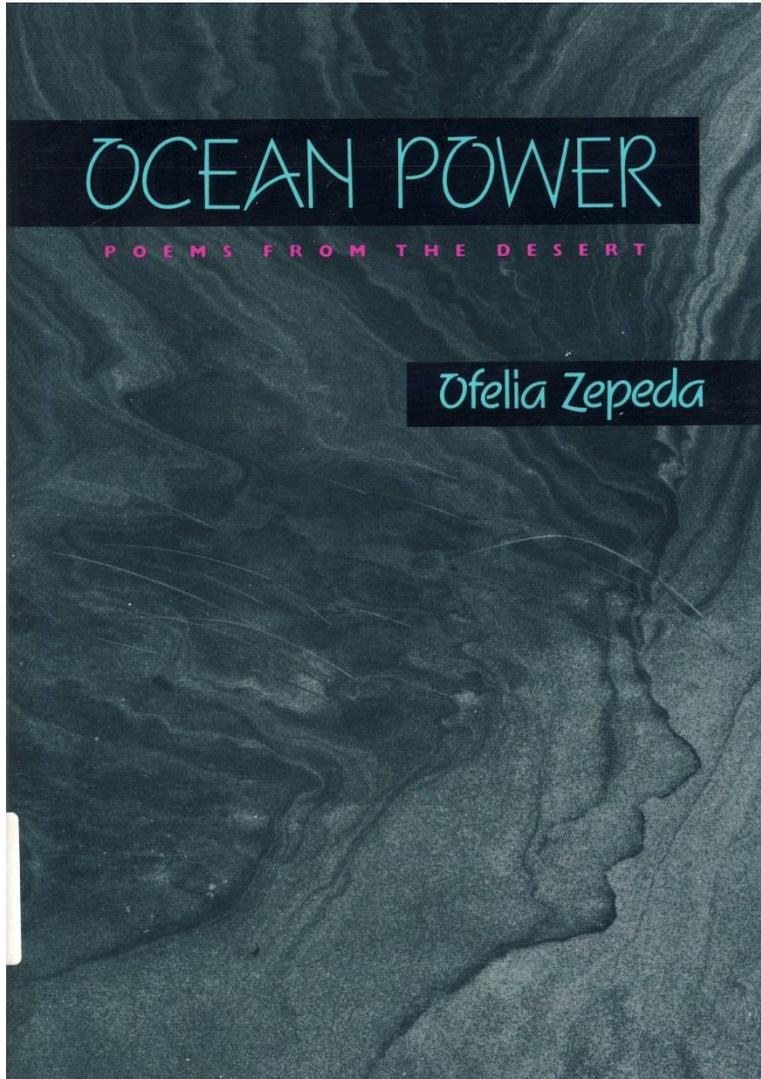
Ceremony in the Poetry of Ofelia Zepeda

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The environment can tell us a lot about ourselves, but mostly the environment creates us. We come from the earth. We are made up of elements which are created in the earth in order to sustain the living. There are a lot of things that we do not understand about the earth. For example, humans are created to live on the earth, but it cannot ensure the existence of the humans that walk its shadows. As humans we pass through this world with blind eyes. As we realize what is around us and we notice the reality of our surroundings, then we can comprehend what the environment has for us. Yet more importantly we can commune with the environment because it speaks to us as long as we listen. In the poem “O’odham Dances” by Ofelia Zepeda, her wisdom words are full of love and compassion for the earth. The poem speaks from the O’odham people to the earth about the value that it has in their lives. The magnificent way the O’odham people practice rain dance is a perfect example of earth and mankind becoming whole. The symbiosis of one with the other is a beautiful connection like an umbilical cord a child has with its mother.

Zepeda shows the O'odham purity, hope, and love for the environment. Ofelia Zepeda



starts her poem with Native American words, which I do not understand. I tried to look for them, yet came out empty-handed because of a lack of translation. For example, I tried looking for them in English to translate in order to understand the poem in deeper meaning. Except there are no specific places where I can go on the internet to type these words and a translation; unlike other languages such as Spanish, French, and German. This language is a beautiful language, yet we cannot

comprehend what it means if we cannot translate it. This is devastating in many ways because we cannot interpret what is being said. Secondly the language barrier is different, isolating O'odham culture. However, retaining the indigenous language in the poem can help resuscitate and preserve O'odham culture.

The mystery of this language adds to the beauty of the world--the beauty of a new world that some will not understand until they come across two colliding worlds making an effort to understand one another. The O'odham language signifies the presence of the O'odham people

and their ancestors. It gives us a path which guides the reader to feel deeply the song that is being sung through poetry. As you hear the song in the poem you can feel peace and ease as if the rhythm hits your bones to the core. It is beautiful since O'odham language is not universal yet your body understands the words that are spoken to the earth by its people.

Through the poem there are words describing how the earth is vital for her people and herself. As the O'odham people sing, they ask of the earth and its creations to be with them in that night: "Throughout the night. / a night too short for such important work / the people converge energies" (16-18). As you read the poem you can hear the ceremony in the depth of her words. Ceremony is a very important concept in Ofelia Zepeda's poetry. Ceremony in this instance is the connection between spirituality and the environment combining together in the moon light. This word has a very powerful meaning, as all the earth and the living things within it come together to participate in this ritual. This ritual is a way to show the appreciation that is held for the earth. The earth gives humans many valuable things. The people ritually come together and thank its work: "They call upon the night. / They call upon the stars in the darkness. / They call upon the hot breezes. / They call upon the heat coming off the earth" (20-22). At this point in the poem the people have power, purity, and love and have come together as a family to communicate with the environment spiritually. The words of Ofelia Zepeda are enlightening to the people that read them. As words they "converge energies" and they call upon these other living things and forces in nature. They seek a greater meaning within the words as if calling for a unity of equality to all. The following quoted lines below are example of what is being implored to the earth in the ceremony.

They implore all animals.
The ones that fly in the sky.
The ones that crawl upon the earth.
The ones that walk.

The ones that swim in the water and
The ones that move in between water, sky, and earth.
They implore them to focus on the moisture.
All are dependent.
From the dark dryness of the desert,
On that one night the call of the people is heard.
It is heard by the oceans, winds, and clouds.
All respond sympathetically. (24-36)

They are calling the rain and asking for help from the animals and the land. All the animals in this earth contribute as equal individuals.

This part of the poem is emotional, rare, and pure with the hope of nature coming to the aid of humanity. This shows how much Ofelia Zepeda communicates with the environment through ceremony. Yet the ceremony is so enlightening, as it has a lot of meaning to others, which is eye-opening in many ways. For example, the lines below explain how the O'odham people wait for the ceremonial essence to occur:

With the dawn we face the sunrise.
We face it with all our humility.
We are mere beings.
All we can do is extend our hands toward the first light.
In our hands we capture the first light.
We take it and cleanse ourselves.
We touch our eyes with it.
We touch our faces with it.
We touch our hair with it.
We touch our limbs.
We rub our hands together;
We want to keep this light with us.
We are complete with this light.
This is the way we begin and end things. (46-58)

This part of the poem is beyond beautiful. The ceremony shows how grateful they are. They acknowledge the earth's accomplishments. Its purity full of hope, faith, and love bring joy to whoever reads this song-poem. The poem also recognizes the circle of life in which we are

reborn. It encompasses together both the end and the beginning of life, which function cyclically. Whatever does not fit in the environment poses the danger of extinction.

Therefore, in essence Ofelia Zepeda writes her poetry with a little bit of her soul. She includes O'odham language in her pieces. Many languages as beautiful as hers have perished with their civilizations. Yet hers is still alive in her poem "O'odham Dances." The poem represents her beliefs, her people, and her culture. Many children decedents are losing the culture and the essence of the beauty of the spirituality within their beliefs from their ancestors. The article "Plastic Shamans and Astroturf Sun Dances: New Age Commercialization of Native American Spiritually" states: "Mass quantities of products promoted as 'Native American sacred objects' have been successfully sold by white entrepreneurs to a largely non-Indian market." (Aldred). New generations are letting the Native cultures slip, as they are molded into a new culture of money.

These new generations are called new-agers, those who gain profit through the mass production Native American objects. These products do not reveal what is meaningful to Native Americans. The people that gain all these profits are "mainly white entrepreneurs in non-Indian markets" (Aldred). The profits do not go to the creators or the believers of the objects such as the elders. Ofelia Zepeda has the mind and the heart of her culture within herself as well as the elders. She's trying to keep the essence of the culture untouched by the evil of the commercial system and preserve the O'odham culture.

Mainly new-agers believe in "healing, physic abilities and full human potential" (Aldred). They think by practicing different ceremonies they can obtain: "Goddess worship, pagan religion, extraterrestrial, channeling spirits." (Aldred). This has gone beyond what it should be in the culture. Every culture has its unique ceremonies. Ofelia Zepeda tries to keep the

word of their culture and their objects in a secret place. The poem contains hand-made objects, which are performed only through authentic ritual.

Several articles observe that language in Native poetry has been reduced to a “reminder” of past cultural traditions. This observation is made in *The Kenyon Review*, “The Condition of Native American Languages in the United States”, and the “Reclaiming the Gift: Indigenous Youth Counter- Native Language Loss and Revitalization” and “Plastic Shamans and Astro turf Sun Dances: New Age Commercialization of Native American Spiritually”. Children are forgetting their native language and turning their native language into another language such as English. “Even those languages with substantial number of children speakers are slipping away, as the residue of genocidal and lingicidal past and the modern influences of English media, technology, and schooling take their toll” (McCarty, et.al.). How authors like Zepeda are working to keep the heritage language is inspiring.

The cultural tragedy of language death is discussed by Zepeda herself. “The loss of hundreds of languages that have already passed into history is an intellectual catastrophe in every way comparable in magnitude to the ecological catastrophe we face today as the earth’s tropical forest are swift by fire” (Zepeda, Ofelia and Hill, Jane). To compare a tropical forest that is vanishing from fire to the words of a people’s language is astonishing. Yet the O’odham language still has an opportunity to survive through such as writing in poetry such as Zepeda’s.

After trying to explain and coming with various scenarios Angelica Lawson said exactly what I think of Ofelia Zepeda poem in “O’odham Dances”: O’odham ethnicity is “grounded in the importance of ritual and ceremony” (Lawson 180). Ofelia Zepeda fights for her language by combing two languages together to show the language of her people. The two worlds collide and become one. Lawson writes: “Zepeda’s inclusion of these translations and of these untranslated

poems is the political statement regarding the legitimacy and vitality of the O'odham language- a statement that speaks to the resilience of the language and resistance to Native language eradication" (Lawson 181).

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