

My Father Was a Toltec by Ana Castillo

Week: 3 of 3

Chapters/Pages: pp. 154, 133, 88

Themes:

- Societal Ills
- Activism
- Labor Issues
- Politics

Recommended Opening: If you had the power to change one thing about the city, what would it be? (Think about education, prisons, transportation, meters, city planning, money allocation, laws & policies, working class people, neighborhoods)

Recommended Reading Passages and Questions:

Read “Invierno salvaje” (“Savage Winter”) pg. 154:

- What kind of life does this poem describe?
- The poet describes the workers as “little machines that shine the floors...” How does she seem to feel about how workers are treated? What are your impressions of how workers in Chicago are treated?
- In what ways do you think workers are not valued? In what ways do you think workers are valued?
- How have you been treated by superiors in jobs before now? How do you anticipate you will be treated in your new job? Why?
- The poet addresses the poem to winter. Is she really just talking to the winter? What could this be a metaphor for? What else threatens her survival?
- What is life calling them to? Why is this life so threatening? What does it mean to live a life like this?
- What do you feel at the end of this poem? Do you think there is hope in this poem? If so, where?
- The poet asks, “Do you think that your bite [...] will quell our drive?” What does she mean by this? What is the bite?
- Where do you get your “drive” from? How do you stay motivated when things are challenging?
- How do you find hope when things are challenging? Are there people you turn to? Things you do? What do you tell yourself to get through?

Read “1975” pg. 133:

- What are proletariat talks? (*If useful, BGL might want to define proletariat: the working or laboring class, often doing industrial and/or manual labor*) Who would be having proletariat talks? What kinds of subjects are covered in these conversations?
- Who do you think she is referring to when she says, “emperor of Chicago”? What do you think of the city’s leadership? Who do you think it serves? Why?
- The narrator mentions “bigoted unions/ that refuse to let us in.” What do you think she might be referring to? What are some strengths of unions? What are some weaknesses?
- Have any of you been part of a union before? What was your experience like? What are your expectations for being part of the union as a tradeswoman? What kinds of power can unions give people?

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- This poem is titled “1975”. Do you think the “proletariat talk” would be any different if it was written today? If so, how? What do you think are the most pressing issues for working people today?
- What do you think she means in the last line when she says: “talking proletariat talks/until one long/awaited day - /we are tired/ of talking”? What do you think might cause that “awaited” day to happen? What do you think they will do when they are tired of talking?
- In what ways do you think working class people have power? In what ways do you think working class people lack power?
- If you could change one thing in our city to improve the lives of working people, what would it be?

Read “In My Country” pg. 88:

- What country do you think she’s talking about? What could she be possibly talking about other than a physical space?
- Can you relate to any of these sentiments Castillo expresses? If so, which ones? Which of the things she named made you the angriest, if any? Which of them made you the saddest, if any?
- Have you ever felt like the country is not your own/not what you would want it to be? If yes, how?
- Do you think all Americans live in the same country, so to speak? Why/why not?
- What role does the government play in the creating/maintaining the kind of country people live in? What role does the individual play in the kind of country s/he lives in?
- Why does she “hesitate” to do things she mentions in the second stanza (sit alone in the park, wear anything that shows her breasts, etc.)? What is your perception about how women in America are treated/their status compared to in other countries?
- What is our responsibility to personally affect change to these injustices we may see around us? How can we affect that change?
- In the country that is not hers, what are the values/what do they care about?
- Contrastingly, in her country, what are her values/what does she care about?
- What would her country look like? Would you like to live in her country?
- What do you think of the end of the poem? What point do you think she’s trying to make about the poet? What does she think the role of the poet is? What do you think the role of the poet is?

Recommended Poetry: (see above)

Recommended Poetry Prompts: “In My Country”

Imagine, as Castillo does, that you have the power to make your own country. What are the things that would and would not happen? Castillo shares very active/descriptive details of what she and others do in her country and what they do now, that makes this NOT her country. What in your life/world do you object to and makes you say that this is not your country?

Recommended Closing: “Let there be everywhere...” –Sonia Sanchez