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Review of *I Have Always Been Here* by Christopher Carmona  
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R. Dean Straight

How can you be an immigrant in the community where your blood line is as deep as the roots of the forest, fills the wells that the local community survives on and is the bedrock which that society has erected a fort and government? These are questions that are magnified locally, and typically left unanswered—but more appropriately unasked. Dr. Christopher Carmona's collection of poems titled *I Have Always Been Here* takes the gloves off and examines the complex question: where are you from? Carmona seeks to address the concept of cultural ties to a community that has been divided by a binary nationality; this is further complicated by the idea that there is no way to categorize or stereotype any one segment of the community because there is more than a simple black-and-white point of view for what it is to be from the Rio Grande Valley.

Carmona is an assistant professor at the University of Texas at Brownsville who was raised and educated in the Rio Grande Valley. Carmona received his PhD in Rhetoric, Writing, and Poetics from Texas A&M University in 2012. His experiences as a poet offer a unique voice for a community that is screaming quietly to be appreciated for their value in a society that seeks to change the origin and nationality of the people of deep South Texas. While it is easy to assume that migration is the key to understanding the border between

Mexico and the United States, Carmona's poetry expresses a valid opinion of the people that do not see a border, but simply a home.

The poems have a lot to offer an audience that is willing to listen. I believe that the limits of this are not what they would appear to be on the surface: only an audience of non-Anglo readers could appreciate, or connect with the songs of the soul Carmona puts forth. It is very evident that citizens of the United States see themselves as a melting pot of different cultures and migration; there is a direct tie between the westward migration of civilization in the continental U.S. So it would not seem difficult to assume that everybody is part of a moving lineage of people that can trace their existence across a number of states and countries. What is being explored by Carmona is an idea that this has been home, the anchor, the root of lineage for generations and will be for generations to follow. This strength offers a new view for many, including myself, when participating in the poems he has presented in this collection. The poems are inclusive and offer ideas that can be readily connected with by people from all walks of life; no matter where you are from, the visual images of home are easy to see - and experience - because even with the cultural aspect of these poems, the sights and smells of a community are not limited by culture or race.

Carmona offers a variety of different poems all written in prose and free verse format. The words are accessible, and even as a non-Spanish speaking reader, the linguistic barriers are minimal due to footnotes and other clues that help identify the meaning behind the words. This forms a double-edged sword because some of the ideas conveyed, and understood, by Carmona require a

knowledge of the Valley, and the culture regionally. This can be weighed against the fact that the overall context of the poems and writings is not so complex as to require significant research into gaining a foothold into the cultural mythology. His work examines a significant amount of Cherokee mythology which I believe also shows an interesting view of the Mexican heritage. As an Anglo reader, I found it difficult to pronounce some of the words - such as Coyolxauhqui - which just do not fit into my mouth and lexicon; this created a distraction for me, as a reader, because I wanted to flow along the river of ideas that Carmona created; instead I found myself adrift trying to pronounce and identify with the myth. It is possible that his intention was to introduce the goddess, and other unfamiliar concepts to a broader audience than other native Rio Grande Valley denizens.

The weakness to this poetry is the ability to make someone feel as if they're the bad guy; on a cursory examination of the poems initially, I found myself asking how I was to blame for some of the misconceptions and negative experiences Carmona decries. On the other hand, I felt a distinctive connection to the poem "check i point" - and I am Anglo. He hammers home the feeling of disharmony as every car is scrutinized, regardless of the occupants' race or nationality, because there is always something ominous about the whole process.

Overall the collection is an interesting change in view that usually does not get explored but quietly sits unanswered by readers who seek to find a voice for their discomfort and who probably don't realize how the border affects a

community that cannot identify with an invisible line on a map separating them from their heritage.