

## Catherine Hardy: About Jimmy Santiago Baca

Like many Southwestern writers, Baca identifies with the land around him and the myths that are part of his culture. And like Joy Harjo, Baca seeks transformation "to make sense of a terrible, terrible history." For Baca, that terrible history is both personal and cultural. Identified as a mestizo, a person with both Spanish and Native American heritage, Baca perceives himself as an outsider in much of his work. Abandoned as a child, Baca's life is seared with a punishing past, which includes incarceration in an Arizona prison, where he found salvation in language and the power of poetry to transform oneself. His first major collection of poems, *Immigrants in Our Own Land* (1979), centers around his prison experience. His poems reveal an honest, passionate voice and powerful imagery full of the dark jewels of the American Southwest landscape (llanos, mesas, and chiles) and the chaotic urban landscape (nightclubs, rusty motors, and bricks) woven into a rich lyricism sprinkled with Spanish. It is this style and careful attention to language that won him an American Book Award in poetry from the Before Columbus Foundation in 1988 for *Martin and Meditations on the South Valley* (1987).

Baca's semiautobiographical *Martin and Meditations on the South Valley* follows the journey of a "detrribalized Apache" in much the same way Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Ceremony* follows the journey of the Native American character, Tayo. For Tayo, returning to his Native American traditions and beliefs restores and guides him back to his genuine self. Baca's *Martin* hungers for the stories of his relatives much in the way Native Americans understand that storytelling is a powerful way to remain connected to one's culture and history. It is through stories and returning to his native land, "Burque" (Albuquerque, New Mexico), that Martin, like Tayo, finds a sense of restoration and peace although Baca always reminds us that the American Dream remains out of reach for most Chicanos and Native Americans.

In *Black Mesa Poems* (1989), Baca becomes a voice for a larger circle of the disenfranchised who work the fields, who push to keep a life going from day to day, who edge near violence daily, and who have almost forgotten the rich roots of their culture. Ironically, it is in Baca's storytelling that these lives will be remembered and their history recorded. In his collection of essays, *Working in the Dark* (1992), which won the 1993 Southwest Book Award, Baca directly discusses his troubled history, the power of language, and the loss of dignity among Chicanos. In an article from that collection, "Chicanismo: Destiny and Destinations," Baca eloquently and poignantly portrays himself as someone who aches to lead his people to freedom much with the sweeping exuberance of Walt Whitman or dark determination of Martin Luther King, Jr.

While Baca's work has cultural and sociological significance to American studies at the end of the 20th c., it also belongs among a growing number of works written by men who, inspired, empowered, or perhaps enraged by the women's movement of the 1970s, have sought to redefine their role as a man. Some of these writers include Robert Lowell, Robert Slt, and James Wright. One of Baca's poems that addresses this issue is "El Gato," a mournful and dynamic wail about a young boy whose life spirals further into violence each day. At the end of the poem, Baca urges all men to learn to "cry" to undo the old wounds of the past and the suffocating thinking they have inherited as men.

The search for a genuine identity is a common theme in American literature. Baca 's journey in his poetry for his genuine identity is an especially critical one because as Rudolfo Anaya and others have recognized, until all the voices of the nation are heard, we will not know the true literature of the U.S.

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