

Poetry is What We Speak to Each Other

KEENE: Mr. Baca, in your book of essays, *Working in the Dark: Reflections of a Poet of the Barrio*, you speak at length and eloquently about how the school system completely failed you--and how it fails so many young people, especially so many young people of color--and how you had to teach yourself, as a young adult and while in prison, first to read and then to write. Reading and writing, especially writing poetry, were vital to you in the beginning: you were using poems to survive, to barter for things among your fellow prisoners. Would you please tell me more about your early development as a poet?

BACA: Well, with a question such as yours everything seems to overlap like in a philosophy class when you start talking about life. In terms of my development, I'm not sure whether I needed to breathe more, or to write poetry more: you see, that's the kind of urgency that was upon me. I sometimes don't know if I would have been able to continue to breathe had I not been able to read poetry, because I came upon poetry in much the same way that an infant first gasps for breath.

KEENE: I see.

BACA: I don't know if I would have lived had I not found poetry. When I began to read, I began very slowly, and a religious man had sent me these books that had English and Spanish on opposing pages. The material was very rudimentary, elementary, kind of religious teachings. Now what happened was that I would read most of the day and into the night, and I would pronounce the language aloud. I pronounced adjectives and adverbs and nouns and prepositions and so forth aloud, and then early in the morning I would wake up and begin to write in a journal.

KEENE: What sorts of things were you recording there? Mere words, thoughts, feelings, memories?

BACA: I was writing things that I remember doing as a kid and as an adult and so forth. And what happened was that, in a place like prison where all sensory enjoyment was deprived, language became more real, more tangible than bars or concrete, than the structure of buildings in the landscape. So I began to read, to read and write in the sense that, metaphorically, I wrapped myself in this cocoon of language, and when I came back out, I was no longer the caterpillar: I was a butterfly.

KEENE: I am interested in that caterpillar stage: what were those first poems like? When you would write letters for other convicts or recite these first poems for your fellow prisoners, what were the effects on them and on you?

BACA: Well, when I would read to the convicts, there was a sense of awe, my awe, their awe, and at the same time a sense of vulnerability, of my, our vulnerability. In other words, language had such a tremendous power, and then, in many instances with convicts, language was the very tool that had been used to destroy them and their families.

KEENE: How?

BACA: For example, when their mothers and fathers had gone into offices to ask about taxes and didn't know how to speak English, they were assaulted with English, by this same language. It was their mothers and fathers who had gone to courts and not understood the English language and were too proud to ask for interpreters. You see, the pride of these people comes from the fact that they had been living on this land for anywhere from 500 to 2000 years. They had a direct family lineage of living on the land, and of the many catastrophes and tragedies that occurred in their lives, one could trace most directly to their inability to understand the English language.

KEENE: In a way your circumstances as well?

BACA: Absolutely. And then, years later, here's this man in prison who's reading poetry to these convicts, and it's cosmoses away from how they understood it, how they had encountered it before. Now it was celebrating who they were and their hearts and their heritage and their languages and their culture.

KEENE: In what languages were these early poems? Were they primarily in either English and Spanish or were they a more complex mixture, a reflection of your background, your community? I remember reading somewhere of your mentioning some songs that passed down to you that were a mixture of Spanish and Tewa.

BACA: I was trilingual. I was writing phonetically the Indian language, Spanish, and English. I was writing phonetically because the furor of my thoughts boiling over mandated that I just write from sound.

KEENE: And so now the convicts looked at the function of language, at poetry, differently, coming from this fellow convict, this young poet?

BACA: Exactly, they looked at it with a sense of awe, that it was an amazing gift that God had given me. It was something that few of them could fathom and that all of them praised. Interestingly enough, I get letters from time to time from convicts who were in prison with me, and the one underlying current that travels through all of their correspondence--and that I was blind to at the time, because I was consumed and absorbed by the language--is that whatever it is I was doing was tremendously inspiring for them.

KEENE: You do realize this now, don't you?

BACA: Sure, now that I'm a bit more seasoned and have put some distance between that time and this time, I look upon it very pleasantly that I was able to fulfill that role through language, through poetry, and really inspire those who were lacking all faith and hope.

KEENE: Earlier you said that your first journal entries were of memories of your childhood. You say in one of your essays that "I draw my poetry from the night, from the culture of night where our daily selves are transformed." Would you discuss this quote with me and talk about how you went from simply writing poems to assembling your early chapbooks and selecting the work that comprised *Immigrants in Our Own Land* ?

BACA: Well, *Immigrants in Our Own Land* was the first book of my poetry that was published by a larger press, by Louisiana State University Press at first, and now by New Directions. But

let me talk about it this way: there are two sides to life. There's the side of life that is mandated by the mores and etiquette of society, and that particular life is extremely simple to understand and define. You know, you buy a new car, you get a good job, you have a nice car or house, and you try to become a family man if that's your bent, and it's very simple how that whole thing is structured. That whole system is structured such that within it are these long veins of racism and bigotry and injustice, and they're very simple to pick out. You can simply sit in any courthouse in the United States today, sit in any courthouse and all day the judge sees cases, and at the end of the day you're going to say, fine, there were two hundred people that went through court today, one hundred were black, and they were all sent to prison.

KEENE: Right.

BACA: Ninety were brown and they were sent to prison. Ten were white and they were freed. It's easy to figure all this out. So then you go to another place, to a banker, and then you realize that he has some suspicions about you because you don't fit the mold that he comes from, and so you're not given the loan that you would like to have to put an addition on your house. So it's very simple if you go about society to the various institutions and sit and witness it. The other side of life, however, is a bit more complicated and concerns what happens in our souls, what constitutes all the cosmic and spiritual clashes that rearrange the plates of our spiritual landscapes. To me all of this is much more interesting than what happens during the day. And so I really try to pay very close attention to the intuitive voice that travels through the canyons of the bone. I don't try to harvest my poetry from what happens in society's institutions as much as I try to reap the poems from what's happening behind the boundaries of society.

KEENE: Please elaborate.

BACA: In other words, while Clinton may stand up and speak about the tremendous freedom that we have in this country, there has never been a time that we've had more writers in the United States who are in prison and who are kept incommunicado. Their tablets and pencils and everything have been taken from them. There's never been a time when there have been more of these people in solitary confinement, in the dark, than there are today. So that's sort of what I'm talking about by "darkness"; I'm really interested in the things that happen in the dark, in the culture of the dark, meaning that, of their own power and force things are bound to come up like the wheat in the sidewalk.

KEENE: How would you relate this to what you have also written, which is that one should not place inordinate trust in critics, nor give oneself over to academic mindgames, but instead believe in a poetry, that follows the "maddened drum of one's own passions"? How too does myth fit in here? What is its role for you? How is background structured around metaphors that may or may not have been lost and how have you used those metaphors to bring yourself into humanity, into humanness, as a man, as a poet, as a Chicano?

BACA: I firmly believe that there are those myths that pertain to a society, and then there are those myths that pertain to an individual. One of the interesting things, though, is that either type of myth never dies. And the interesting thing about myths is that there are psychological and spiritual and emotional myths that are just as real and buried as the dinosaur bones we're discovering today. We're having to redefine the history of the evolution of who we are. Those same myths are very, very alive in us and the more that we discover them, the more we discover our own journey.

KEENE: As human beings, people, poets?

BACA: All. Where we come from and where we go. And I also strongly believe that when you discover a myth in yourself, you cannot approach it with a formulated or prefabricated critique, you cannot template it. What's going to happen is that you discover a myth or a symbol, in the same way that a child discovers its mother, not so much through the mind, but through the sensors, through the mouth and the nose and the fingers and hands; this personal mythology really does sustain one, as much as infant's discoveries enable breast feeding. Myths and symbols, we never become adults in their presence. We're always children in awe of them, and those are the things truly that give us insight into the darkness that we go through. It's strange because we live in a society that says myth and symbol have been replaced by science. You really see it at a place like Los Alamos here and at other science centers around the country.

KEENE: Science has assumed the former sway of myth, religion?

BACA: It's all being replaced by scientists who are pursuing the ultimate, who want to crack the ultimate secret, and it's strange because if you go visit Los Alamos--and in Los Alamos you can visit a lot of them--when you go to the houses of many of these scientists, you realize that these are people who have lost their myths. These are people who have lost their symbols, you know. The way that you can tell this is simply by walking through their homes. You see that they've created their lives out of order, in revenge against the mothering symbol.

KEENE: You seem to be saying that science as seen through the lives of these scientists, through the world that they structure, becomes a masculine entity. Opposed perhaps to the feminine, the humanities. Science in this sense is hard, clean, perspicuous, rational.

BACA: Well, the atmosphere is very antiseptic and sterile, an abyss that you walk through when you visit their lives. Everything is interpreted through science, and you're sort of left with a dryness in your mouth, as if you'd just taken a tablespoon of castor oil.

KEENE: For this sort of world-view, we might speak of its binary opposite as that which is soft, shifting, blurring, emotional: the arts, humanities, poetry. In both your poems and your essays, you talk about the duality of yourself as a poet, about the feminine side that informs your writing of poetry. Your discussion of this interested me because I don't very often hear men talk about this idea of their duality. Will you say something more about all of this, as it sort of relates to this whole notion of having lost the notion of myth and mothering, and these signs and symbols that really go back to the beginning of humankind?

BACA: A remarkable thing occurred to me when I came upon language, and I really began to provoke language to decreate me and then to give birth to me again. What I experienced was this: when you approach language in this being-reborn sense, you approach language in the way that the Hopis approach language, which is that language is a very real living being. That's how I approach language. I approach it as if it will contain who I am as a person. Now, when language begins to work itself on you and make certain demands of you, it begins to ask you to risk yourself and walk along its edge. When it does that and you do that, the Yoruba people in Africa have a symbol that they create, and it's made out of bamboo-leaves, gold, and rosary beads on it and so forth, and it curls up on itself. This symbol has a thick base so that it's almost like a gourd. It curls all the way around itself and goes back into the thick base, this is the gift that they give men who have given birth to themselves.

KEENE: Which is what happened with you.

BACA: Which is what happened with me--I gave birth to myself. You have to understand that what I'm saying, it came before Robert Bly's Iron John, it comes before all of this mainstream computer-chip valley stuff that they're putting out for the male white corporate executive. All of this birthing and the femininity in the men is a very indigenous characteristic I've seen practiced since I was born. I've seen men do it. And simply, what happens is that they begin to nourish themselves. They begin to nourish themselves, taking their sustenance from mother earth and all the things that they see about them. In other words, direct observation of the world around them comes into them, and they may not be as smart bookwise as most people...

KEENE: Which does not matter.

BACA: ... But there's a tremendous feminine characteristic in them that is directly geared toward nourishing and sustaining generation after generation of people who are threatened from all sides. I can distinctly remember when we didn't have anything to eat, as a child, when my grandfather would begin to sing all these songs. And the songs surely but surely would end up taking our hunger away. Or, I remember that we had windstorms that were so terrible they would come and knock barns down, knock houses down, and my grandmother would hold me against her chest where I could hear the vibrations in her bones, in her chest, because she was a small Apache woman. She would begin to hum these deep, deep hymns, and the vibrations in her bones were a male song that was sung to me as a little child: do not be afraid of the wind, the wind will not come in here. And then we also believed in different gods outside, the wind gods and the wind spirits and stuff. And so I was terrified, but when her singing began, I was being given masculinity through my grandmother's singing and femininity through my grandfather's singing. And then when we'd go to the fields to work, my grandfather would always tell me how beautiful it was for a man to be gentle with mother earth, how she was our mother and how when we handled the plants we were handling a young woman.

KEENE: If only this were our usual view of things! Society has lost much of this, however. Would you say that the people of your generation--and I am thinking here of Chicano, Indian people--would you say they received this knowledge and passed it on or is this something that needs to be retaught among the younger people?

BACA: I think it needs to be retaught because I think, for all of us, our history is such that it's still very recent. Let me give you an example. Black folks had a system of slavery that was imposed upon them. Now we have lots of scholars who have studied all of this extensively.

One of the strange things about our history as the Chicano people is that we still live under a slave system that nobody wants to recognize, and it's very strange that during the hearings for the Attorney General, a lot of those people were saying, well you can't come in and be a judge since you have these two people working for you that you haven't paid taxes on. And it's strange that that's multiplied about 10 million times across the country; there's an awful lot of us who are being paid \$8 a day.

KEENE: But is that slavery?

BACA: Nobody wants to call it a system of slavery. Many of these \$8-a-day workers are people who have lived here for many hundreds of years. But it's like, I mean, I can go out on the street right now and pick up four Chicanos and pay them, tell them I'll give all of you guys five bucks each if you work all day. And chances are they're going to say okay because they don't have any food and they have to pay the bills. They're completely at the mercy of these employers. So the whole system is still very much part of our contemporary reality. The interesting thing about your question is that the answer is yes, I do need to, we all need to re-educate our children to the indigenous values that we hold as a people, that have made our heritage what it is and sustained us up to today. The good thing is this: as I said before, this history has been fairly recent, because it was in the 1950's and 1960's that we made these mass migrations from what we call the "campos," the villages, the pueblos. We all came in from the villages and pueblos about 1950 and onward, so our urbanization has been rather recent, and so when I go to schools to talk to young kids and I begin to speak about the indigenous values, almost all of them shake their heads because they instinctively feel that it's real, it's that close to them.

KEENE: So you're saying that much of this empowering, sustaining knowledge still remains?

BACA: The basic threshold, the cornerstone, is in all the people. We simply have to reaffirm that by telling the people that it's okay to come home now, you can return because we really miss you. You don't have to give away your identity, your culture, your language, your dances, your songs, your poetry, your paintings to become an "assimilated" white Anglo male. You don't have to do that anymore. You can come back home and be successful in this society and still offer it all the resources that come from your culture.

KEENE: You write of having wanted to remake yourself as " the blondest hair, bluest eyed" Chicano out there and of how you felt when the people in the barrio had begun to mock you, how you could not understand why you were trying to do this, how they saw right through you. But the flip side is that there was only one other world left to you, the world that led you to prison and leads so many of our young people to crime and imprisonment. I know you are now working with organizations like the Puente Foundation. How have you been able to enrich the lives of these young people so that they do not experience such powerful self-loathing?

BACA: When I'm working here on my farm by myself, I become privy to the most extraordinary beauty that's provoked through language, and I'm left many times just weeping and thinking, how can I carry this ephemeral substance and place it in another child's hands? One of the wonderful things about the Puente Project is that when all the kids come together, hundreds and hundreds of them, I get to share all of this with them. And instead of reflecting back to them what mainstream society has done for 500 years, which is to say, "You're a lazy Mexican who sleeps under a cactus with a mule," I reflect back to them the extraordinary beauty that they are. There's no feeling like it in the world! It's a very palpable feeling that

begins to come out of their stories; say there's a thousand of them, and I'm standing down on this podium below, in this big, huge lecture hall, and there's no experience quite like it when all those thousand kids begin to just have this love for themselves flow down.

KEENE: You are teaching them to be reborn, to be reborn in love of themselves.

BACA: Right, and for the first time in your life you realize what it must feel like to be born as a child and have a society built around your values--an extraordinary feeling of being very close to God at that moment. And I never had that feeling before, ever. As I stood there speaking for the first time for an hour on the tremendous beauty that they represented, on their inheritance of all of this, on what they embodied, I'd begin to feel an extraordinary sense of belonging to this society. Experiencing this, remember this is a very invigorating experience that keeps me writing more and more. The first time, the minute I walked out of the hall, the feeling left me. I was again this anonymous person without a face or without a culture.

KEENE: I remember your anecdote in which you talk about being on a panel with the daughters of Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and you mention how not a single Chicano student stood up to ask a question, even though they outnumbered the black and white students thirty-to-one.

BACA: True. You see, the thing that we've been taught as a culture is that it is much better to keep your silence and not try to overreach yourself because when a people have had everything taken from them--we had our land taken from us and our culture and our language, and there's not much else left to take except our pride--so in order to keep your pride you don't overreach yourself. You should become a plumber and not a doctor, become an electrician and not a lawyer. Because if you don't make it, you're going to shame the family, and we can't live with that kind of shame. All we have is our pride, so what I'm basically asking the young Chicano people today is to please break the silence and you will see that your feelings are reaffirmed a million times throughout the day by other people who feel the same way. We've been taught that silence is best, because language was one of the primal enemies, and if we could just keep quiet, we would be able to protect ourselves. And so, the great call of the day in the square, the town-crier, was "Do not say anything." So consequently when anybody came to the door, most of the people would run to the back room and would not say anything. They wouldn't even answer the door.

KEENE: Which is not so very different from other cultures like African-American culture, where a tradition of "speaking out," affirming one's name, identity, and humanity, was always considered very dangerous, yet people bravely did so.

BACA: But we've also been taught that to speak our feelings is something that verges on arrogance. And since our culture has a really strong strain of humility in it, very few of us stand up to speak when called upon.

KEENE: But you continue to speak, through your poems, your work with students, through other means. You worked on a film not too long ago and you describe the experience of returning to one jail where you'd been incarcerated, and of how, as you drove up, you were physically revolted by seeing one of the guards who used to inflict these unspeakable cruelties against you and the other convicts, but then you also describe how, as you were making this film, you went through whole series of feelings, and how at the end you really began to be able to deal with the men who were there, imprisoned. What was the toll of making this movie? How had you worked through all those conflicts of having once been part

of that society where you were now seen as completely different?

BACA: Quite frankly I was stunned by how extensive the system had become! You have to understand that the prison system alone in California has a budget greater than three-quarters of the nations on the face of earth.

KEENE: Really?

BACA: The budget of California prison systems alone is larger than that of three-quarters of the nations on the earth. Think about it. It's just one state out of fifty in the United States. Also, on any given day, we have more people in prison than we have in the school systems in America, and it's mounting daily. The funny thing is that this year so many people went to prison, but what we have to understand as a nation is that we have trained millions upon millions upon millions of convicts and spit them out of the prison system. We're not changing or improving things! Out in society, we never want to think about this. We are going through the same thing that we went through with the nuclear plants; there were people traveling the country to tell of what might happen if a nuclear plant did malfunction. But people did not want to listen. Unfortunately, what makes matters worse here is that there's nobody in this country walking around talking about what's happening when the prison systems malfunction. Yet we have all of this plutonium that we've stored in the sense that every man who comes out of prison is capable of tremendous chaos and carnage.

KEENE: But am I wrong in stating that if you criticize the prison system, the penal system, if you call for reforms, if you aim toward dealing with this complex of issues and talk seriously about rehabilitation, about improving every aspect of our educational system and about instilling esteem and self-knowledge in the minds of these young people that you'll be accused of being soft on crime, of being the stereotypical knee-jerk liberal? How can you frame this question without appearing to be "soft on crime"?

BACA: Well, I think it's an indignation to the sensibilities of a civilized human being to walk into a place like I walked into in California and see fifteen thousand kids--and they're kids--who are not in prison yet but on their way, fifteen thousand kids who've been given one foot of airspace around their bunks, and to top it off, the washing machines and the dryers for these fifteen thousand are made and manufactured by the same people who made and manufactured the death camps in Germany.

KEENE: Oh my! [whispers]

BACA: At that prison, you can look across the street and see Exxon, and you start to think about what happened in Alaska, about how we will never really be told about the tremendous loss of wildlife, the destruction of nature there. At that same prison, you can look across the other street and see this amusement park which has the biggest rollercoaster in the world. Then you realize then and there that the rollercoaster is set for thrills; you see, we put our kids on it and they get a thrill out of life. Look either way and you realize that it's all about money. Exxon will take the entire country if it has to. And then you look into the prison system and see that 85% of the children are black and brown, and then something horrible begins to turn in your stomach: you realize that instead of anything changing, the evils that beset the society have become so sophisticated at camouflaging themselves that you begin to sense this terrible doom about it all, that things won't change, that there is no going back. I could only say to those people who would ask for more prisons to be built that at no time in the history of this country has anyone ever been able to point to any study or circumstance which affirms

that prisons have helped better society's problems or reduce crime. And we have never ever tried any other alternative for the very reason that there's so much money in the penal system, it's a business. To give you an illustration: when I was in prison, the legislature would set aside money for a \$250,000 conditioning system, right?

KEENE: Right.

BACA: And I would see the trucks from my cell window arrive with the air-conditioning unit, and the next day the air-conditioning unit was gone. It was GONE, never to return. Neither the Federal Government nor the state nor civilians could hold those prison officials accountable for anything that they did and do. It's in the contracts! For instance, half of the food that was brought to prison--like, let's say, a truckload of chickens--would be sold on the black market! And this happens everywhere! Half of the guards were bringing in guns and selling them to the inmates, bringing in half of the drugs in prison, half-kilos of cocaine and heroine every week! Everybody knew who they were; this was just the way the system worked. You asked "how do you frame this idea," and systems work the same way: how do you frame a system where it works, where it's able to give you the kind of picture that you can live with, and yet it doesn't confront you, so what's wrong with it? It becomes okay.

KEENE: Accepting things as they are is always easier; it requires nothing from us.

BACA: Look at Bush's son. At the Republican convention, they asked him if he was going to return that \$6 million to the taxpayers, and he smirked into the camera and said, "Are you kidding me?"

KEENE: [Laughs] You end up having to ask who the criminals are, what behavior is criminal? You do come to see how power and money frame all questions and issues.

BACA: Exactly.

KEENE: I want now to explore another idea that informs your experience and your poetry, which is "Chicanismo." One of your charges to yourself is "to remain true to my reality that in doing so I may honor my people and pay full homage to their spirit." All your books of poetry seem to carry this as their unspoken theme. Would you just talk about "Chicanismo" and what it might mean for younger people?

BACA: Chicanismo...is a state of being, which has to do with compassion and humility and patience and love. For example, I'm writing this novel which takes place in an orphanage, and in one of the scenes this Chicano boy is pushing this Indian kid into the shower, so that he has to wash. The Indian kid refuses to wash, however. And when little Daniel, the Chicano boy, pushes him into the shower and realizes that there's blood on the boy's body, on his buttocks, he realizes that the Indian boy has been raped.

KEENE: Raped?

BACA: Yes. And what Daniel does is take the sponge and the soap and begin to wash the boy, because the boy refused to wash for some weeks. So Daniel begins to wash him, and there's a point in the description of the paragraph of these two characters where Daniel gets on his knees and begins to wash the boy's feet.

KEENE: How incredible!

BACA: What I'm saying through this symbol--for the Chicano and the Indian are both Indians--is that the little Chicano kid is washing the body, the feet of the Indian boy who has been raped, and I think as a society--I'm only speaking of the Chicano people--what we have to do now in order to get back to the idea of Chicanismo, of who we are as a people and what we can become, I think we first have to go through the grieving stages of what happened to us as a people; that in fact many, many members of our families have assimilated and are ashamed of where they come from. This is true, too, of the black experience; there may be many black folks who are ashamed of their skin...

KEENE: The skin, the past...

BACA: The Chicanos are ashamed of their black culture by which I mean that we wear this despised aspect of ourselves around our culture; and what I'm saying is, we must grieve first then go through an act of contrition, in the sense that Daniel washed the Indian boy's body. It's not good enough just to simply grieve. You have to act, because when you act on grief, grief becomes forgiveness of oneself. You then begin to stand up, and you become immensely stronger then to go on your journey to decide who and what you're going to be.

KEENE: This is such both a powerful image and statement. also, the washing of the body, of the feet alludes to Scripture.

BACA: The Bible.

KEENE: Another area of our heritage. So one could say that through Chicanismo you begin to resolve the problematic dichotomy between what you received from Spain and Spanish culture, from Europe, and what you inherited from these Indian cultures that have been raped, suppressed, written out of the record. I have noticed throughout your essays and poems that you do look back to the Indio grandfather as a source of great strength.

BACA: I do. What's interesting about a people who have been colonized is that the dominant society does such an extraordinary job of taking away their rituals. Because once you can take away those rituals, you really have done ninety percent of the work. Keeping these rituals alive is where poetry then becomes very important. There's been this huge reaction in academia, especially in the English departments, this incredible backlash that says black literature, brown literature, and red literature is no good, any you must stay with our literature, now the white European literature.

KEENE: As if those other literature's were not our cultural inheritance as well.

BACA: I was privy to these notions in tow outlandish cases, one in San Diego and one in Santa Fe, where two tenured professors had written letters saying that black culture and brown culture and red culture and Asian culture were nothing but backwash swamps better left alone. And those professors who sent those letters were given tremendous amounts of money to go around the country on the lecturing circuit. So, you see, an awful lot of people supported these views. These two were held up as heroes. All of this is really extraordinary to me!

KEENE: Such scenes become typical, especially with the current reaction against "political correctness." You ask that you and that your culture receive respect, you ask that these authorities examine more closely what informs their own world view, and people become hysterical.

BACA: Yes. Many of their criticisms are based on the European, Eurocentric view that the works of a writer like Toni Morrison or of indigenous people deal heavily with heritage and family and roots and culture.

KEENE: These texts are only sociology and history, not art; they're too political.

BACA: These critics say that writers such as Morrison, such as the indigenous writers, are simply invoking the maudlin sympathy of their not-very-smart readership. It's not really literature: this is what Mark Strand intimated when he was here at a talk, that women in the Southwest are not really writers. In a recent London Times, there is a piece by a writer who had just visited the Nuyorican Poets' Cafe on the Lower East Side. He talks about this hoopla of indigenous writers, of people of color reading poetry, and asks if this is supposed to make us think that they're poets! It was a real bubblebath of humorism. The guy ended up saying that the only poets that America has ever had and will ever have are Ginsburg and Burroughs. He broke down the rest of American poetry with statements like, "the blacks, they make people cry but they're not poets," and so on. Now two weeks after I read this, I'm invited to the University of New Mexico to speak to a writing class. Most of the white kids in the class are saying to me, "I can't published because I'm white." So I ask them, "Does that mean, because you're white, you should get published?"

KEENE: That's a twist in perspective!

BACA: And they said, "Well, yes!"

KEENE: [Bursts into laughter].

BACA: Then the professor herself tells me, "I change my last name to a black name, you know, so that I can get published."

KEENE: A black name?

BACA: That's what she said. So I said, "Does it work?" And she replied, "Yes, it works." I thought, is this what you're teaching your students? I'm astounded by what's going on in the English departments, what professors are promoting; on the one hand, that you would have to take people's names to get published, but on the other hand, you have to be white to be a good writer. Now the interesting thing about all of this as I was going to say was that, when we as poets and writers go deep into our past, number one, it's extraordinarily difficult to deal with the pain, because it all has to do with revelation, and when I dig deep into my past and go to my roots to try to uncover the metaphors that are going to sustain me spiritually and emotionally and that are going to put me in the center of the universe feeling comfortable, what's happening is that I have a history and a heritage and a culture that I'm reaping so much from, and I realize that in doing that there are some people who have NO heritage, who have no culture, other than the culture of money. You know what I'm saying?

KEENE: Exactly.

BACA: This amazes me. It's so sad, in a way, because I don't ever want to disrespect the gift of poetry. When writing a novel, I know what God has given me is an enormous journey that is so enriching and I don't want to mock or criticize those who don't have it; but, I don't understand why, if someone can't buy something with money, then they must try to destroy it. In other words, poetry in the Chicano world, in Chicanismo, is such an inherent part of one's living that it does not consist of extracting the sympathy of anyone. It's a part of one's living as much as a bull in a field and a rainbow in a sky and the woman in the morning who's singing. All are the different threads in the weaving of one's life, you know?

KEENE: Chicanismo then is an essential part of the fabric of your poetry and life?

BACA: Right. When you live in this Chicano world, poetry is what we speak to each other.

KEENE: Your poems and essays often feature startling images--and "startling" at least to me--of the sort that in Neruda or Paz have been called "surreal" but that, as you have just said, are really not "surreal" but which actually arise from the life that you have lived and are living.

BACA: Yes! It comes out of the hands that people work with and the language that they speak with and the food that they eat. All of the poetry that Neruda wrote was not so much "surrealism" as it was "hyper realism." In other words, Europe called it "surrealism" because of the Europeans minds bent to hide things within something. Neruda came from Chile, and people there have a tendency to show things, as the ocean shows things, because they share their land with the ocean. It's a hyper realism where "here" is the abundance of who we are.

KEENE: Which is how Garcia Márquez has described the mythopoetic reality of Macondo, of the Patriarch's rule, of the return of the most beautiful drowned man in the world.

BACA: You know. And when you can live this and not have somebody exploit this abundance, then you feel trust, you trust enough to show people this; but when you show people things and they begin to exploit, then you're forced to hide it. It's funny how literature is a meandering stream that comes out of this large lake that's called society, which means that you cannot divorce literature from society. One of the most interesting examples of the recent trend to do just this involved Carolyn Forché's anthology *Against Forgetting*. W. W. Norton had asked her to do an anthology of world poets. Well, she put it together, and some people were very, very disturbed that she had included as America's foremost poets many people of color, and many people who had done prison time. Forché has gone on to say that, in every single instance, every single poet that she picked from other countries had been in prison, and many of these poets were considered heroes, to some extent, by the people. Except in America, where those hailed as great poets usually have never walked within a planet's distance of prison.

KEENE: But she was not saying that one has to go to prison to be a great poet, nor championing imprisonment, was she?

BACA: Not at all. She said that the condition of who constituted great poets in America was very disturbing for her, because ultimately the people that she did pick were people who had prison experiences, not because she went for that but because that was just part of the information that the poet carried in his bank.

KEENE: Well, the people who have told us what we should and should not read and have created these various curricula and great books programs have always sort of championed writers who have been men of means, of leisure, who really didn't even have to work, let alone

serve any prison time. Oh, we have Oscar Wilde, Antonio Gramsci, Martin Luther King, Jr., and others, but not too many. Perhaps the imprisoned were not writing years ago, but to dismiss their experience out of hand is perverse, because there has always been all this other experience out there, much of it up until recently unexplored. Perhaps it was never even reaching the page; or if it was reaching the page, it was suppressed; or, as you say about Santa Fe, it was exploited so that the people who actually live it and write it receive no credit while other people are coming along and claiming these elements, these experiences as their own.

BACA: Yeah, it's a funny thing, and people should know that there's no turning back now. Because, what little these writers from indigenous cultures have, there's no stopping their writing now; and anybody who proposes to try to stop black writing or proposes to try to stop Indian writing or Asian writing is really clinging to a very threadbare coat that's going to tear, you know?

KEENE: Right. We're not going to turn back, no matter what.

BACA: It's just not going to happen. Suddenly you have a very unsettling kind of tragedy that's set into those people that believed the lie for so long, and it's my belief that poetry in its ultimate sense really tries to go for the pulsating vein of reality in the landscape or society. You can't write poetry unless it's the kind of poetry that sings and praises truth.

KEENE: As your poetry does. I have really just two further questions I want to talk out with you. The first is that, with the publication of *Black Mesa Poems*, and with *Martin and Meditations on the South Valley*, you have become a famous poet, so to speak. You are asked to read all over the country, and younger poets and writers recognize your name: you have what we might call "marquee value." How has this fame affected your sense of being as a poet, your poetic sensibility, and also how has it affected the way that you approach poetry? Has there been any effect?

BACA: Okay. Well, let me just say that we constantly find ourselves having to compromise ourselves for society. Our society says we'll give you this, but you have to do that. You want a position in this department, you have to move here, you have to do this: we constantly have to give up things and that's okay. I can understand that give and take, I can understand that. On the other hand, as a poet I realized very, very early on that I would love to have been able to teach at a university...

KEENE: Like most well-known American poets...

BACA: I would love to have been able to have medical insurance and so forth; but I, as the poet that I am, I really had to stay home with my two children, write poetry here, and endure poverty in the cruelest sense of the word. I really had to beg, borrow, and steal dimes to get enough gas to make it, to buy milk and so forth, for many years. But that was the playing field that I had chosen for myself, my terms. When I was cold and my baby was cold, we were cold together. And when my baby and I walked out in the snow in the morning, we did it together: I wasn't somewhere teaching, I wasn't cashing a check, I was there, and we had enough apples stored away and potatoes that we were going to eat supper. The thing about poetry is that early on I came to it in prison in such a way that society was not going to accept me, so I then had to bring society to me through my poetry. I had to write the kind of poetry that was accessible and yet which would not compromise my experience, so that society would say, "Oh we understand what he's writing about, and we think that the poetry's okay."

KEENE: This is how it happened.

BACA: Yes. So once I was able to set that up, I went on this journey where I began to just write from my own voice, and the strange thing is that when I encountered offers along the way--like with the film *Bound By Honor* when I was immediately offered other films, for millions of dollars--I turned them all down to come back to my farm. Basically, I was penniless. I had said in *Bound By Honor* what I wanted to say, and I had made enough money on that to do some of the projects that I wanted to do. But when I came back home, I was basically broke and I had to start over again.

KEENE: With your poetry and other film scripts and projects?

BACA: Yes. I'm currently finishing a novel and working on a book of poetry, but all of those things have been done on my terms, not out of pride or arrogance but mostly because I am so interested in the journey of self-discovery that I'm on. Despite the demands I encounter, I still find myself pretty much out here on this farm alone, and I can devise my own journeys, pick the tools I need, and go after things other people wouldn't go after. So I guess what I'm trying to say is that what has occurred over these past few years hasn't changed me much. What it's really reaffirmed is that the work I was doing before is the work I should be doing and I'm doing it now.

KEENE: So many people would love to be able to say what you are saying and mean it.

BACA: You know, it's a very hard way to go and it's not heroic in any sense of the word, but it is fulfilling. You do get up in the morning and feel a real power sense of the tree and the yard and the grass growing and the sun coming up, and you feel yourself very much a part of that whole, tenuous existence in the world, and it's not structured around a paycheck or insurance or tenure or grades or a new car. It's really sustained by a sense of appreciation for one's breathing and getting up and saying, "Hi, how are you?" and "Let's have a cup of coffee": the real small, simple pleasures in life.

KEENE: These small, simple pleasures run like motifs throughout all your poems, all your writings.

BACA: Yeah, the real, small pleasures in life. The idea of just seeing a man in prison who's condemned to die: I come out of the shower and it's 9 o'clock and I see him napping and I look at his face, and there's a look on this man's face, on the face of a man who's going to die,

that I think is more important for me than to go to work in a prison system and get brownie points. I would much rather go back to the cell and write about what I saw on the man's face. You know?

KEENE: Sure.

BACA: And my life has always been sort of like that, about unendingly learning about all the mistakes I made and never being so stupid as to not try to learn something new from my children or from the earth or from friends. And then sort of translating all of that into a book.

KEENE: Would I be wrong in assuming that to be your philosophy of writing?

BACA: Well, I really don't think much about the poetry that I write or much about my writing except that if it feels really good to me, if it feels like I've hit on a jugular-- 'cause I'm around a lot of sheep and bulls and horses, and I know blood, I know hearts, I know a horse's eyes, I know a dog's tongue, I know those things very intimately, I know those things. And when I feel a poem, I feel for that: I feel for the dog's tongue and the horse's eye or the bull's chest, you know, and if I feel, if I can feel it in the poem, then the poem's okay.

KEENE: You're underscoring in different words the charge you gave to other poets, to "reject the killing safety of literary workshops and universities, and don't fear the jagged emotion."

BACA: In a nutshell, the indication of a good poem, I think, is very emotional; every jagged emotion has a song all its own. You know the Navajos have a tradition: when a man or a woman go traveling, they come back home and they stand in the center of the teepee or the hogan where they live, and they repeat their names seven times. And if the repetition of the name is clear, then they've come back with their name intact-- no one has stolen their name. No one has stolen their souls, so to speak. And in a society that thrives on stealing souls, I feel pretty good that I can stand up in my little place and repeat "Jimmy Santiago Baca" seven times and it's done very clearly and then I pray before my altar and I'm okay for the day. I can start to work.

KEENE: This is very inspiring to hear! I think both the people who already know your poetry and those who are unfamiliar with your work will really be able to appreciate what you have been saying here, because in talking about the specifics of your own life and art, you are extending feelings and experiences that are common to us all.

BACA: Yeah. Poetry transcends all colors and cultures, and ultimately beats from the red heart. You show me someone without a red heart, and I'll show you someone who's not a human being. [Bursts into laughter]

KEENE: [Laughs]

BACA: I do believe the poet's job in the real sense of the word is to always be there where the emotional and psychic and spiritual earthquakes are happening, and to be strong enough to be able to sing in those big chasms. The poet's job is to be at the epicenter.

KEENE: Certainly.

BACA: I don't know if you've ever been at a place where there's been an earthquake, but let me just say it this way: I went with my two children to a place out by where there's a bird refuge, where thousands and millions of birds come. And we were messing around, trying to

cross this river, but they had this long fence strung across the river. It was something very strange that day because my son, my youngest one, immediately fell to the earth and began to play in the sand. My other son began to cross the river, clambering sideways across it, and I followed him, the river rushing beneath, and what was extraordinary about that time, that day was that I had another friend with me, and he began to sing songs; but we began to comment, all four of us, that the space seemed to be, seemed to have been cleared and sanctified in some strange way. It was that our movements were slower, our words were more sincere, there seemed to have been the breath of great mother earth expelled from that particular point, and two days later, the epicenter of an earthquake was there, right there.

KEENE: What a story!

BACA: I don't know what poets' jobs are except that we need to get to the epicenters before they happen, so we can participate in that power. Not be the victims of it. I want us to participate in the power of an earthquake before the earthquake happens; I want us to be part of the process of that power coming up, and then, when those earthquakes occur, we understand them in a human sense. When things happen to human beings' lives, we can then write about them.

KEENE: Well, you know, I can't disagree with that.

BACA: You know what the Navajos say again, right? They say that when it's a drought, you learn to live very dryly, you become drought. And when it's really, really rainy, then you become rain. So that's how I think as a poet.

Publication Status:

Excerpted Criticism ^[1]

Criticism Target:

Jimmy Santiago Baca

Source URL: <https://modernamericanpoetry.org/content/poetry-what-we-speak-each-other>

Links

[1] <https://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/publication-status/excerpted-criticism>