
Baca, Jimmy Santiago. *Singing at the Gates: Selected Poems*. New York: Grove Press, 2014. 249 pp.

<http://www.groveatlantic.com/#page=isbn9780802122100%20>

Jimmy Santiago Baca's long career is well-represented in the collection *Singing at the Gates* (Grove Press 2014). From his early prison poetry to longer lyric poems to accompany art exhibitions, the collection solidifies the major themes in Baca's poetic oeuvre. The poems chart a move from self to other that embraces a hybrid identity seeking to understand the ways of injustice that act on men and women of color.

The collection opens with "Excerpts from the Mariposa Letters" as a way of grounding Baca's poetic journey in its earliest incarnation. The young speaker fairly jumps off the page with passion—for love, desire, fear. The letters expose the pleasure and pain of being able to express emotion and thought through the written word. The work is raw and makes a nice introduction to the more familiar poems of Baca's early collections.

The individual in captivity appears to remind readers of Baca's early start, and his continued interest in the ways that individuals fare in prisons. Readers familiar with Baca's early work will welcome the return of some of the vivid images pervading his poems: The young prisoners who "gnaw their hearts off / caught in the steel jaws of prison" ("Just Before Dawn" 20-21) take on a new resonance when one considers Baca's active engagement with writing workshops in prisons and juvenile detention centers. The collection offers retrospective look at the ways in which poetry can heal wounds both self- and society-inflicted.

Chicano scholars have focused on Baca's relationship to the land through forging a Native/Chicano identity. Poems such as "A Handful of Earth, That is All I Am" offer a poignant return to the land politics that pervade northern New Mexico history. The lines "My blood runs through this land, / like water thrashing out of mountain walls / bursting, sending the eagle from its nest" (8-10) highlight mestizo claims to the land and culture of the US Southwest. However, these themes of land, ancestors, and home find new significance when read with newer works. Ranging from Mexico to Kansas, "Rita Falling from the Sky," examines the life of a Chihuahuan woman found in Kansas and locked in a mental institution. Later, a doctor discovered that she was speaking a native language of the Rarámuri Indians, and she was released to return to her village. The long, lyric poem gives voice to Rita as it imagines her journey through the desert walking north. The folk images of chile, peyote, maize, clay, and more underscore that the land she traverses is actually Aztlan (Baca 189). As a new poem in the collection, "Rita Falling from the Sky" makes visible the move from self to other in Baca's quest for a universal exploration of hybridity and identity, yet the effect is less haunting than the earlier poems.

Newly-collected, recent poems are also noteworthy for their desire to speak in different voices. The poetic focus on a transvestite prostitute in "Smoking Mirrors" and a young woman in "Julia" offers a speaker that initially seems jarringly different from the speaker in the early sections of the collection. The poems are an attempt to negotiate a "psychic split" that Baca felt evident in his earlier work; the leap from bicultural to transvestite is not so far, after all, he argues (xxii). While the subject matter is worthy and challenging, there seems to be something missing from the context of the poems. Baca notes in the Preface that some of these new poems were written

to accompany photography exhibits about the Juarez border and Northern New Mexico. It would be interesting to view the photos alongside the poems.

While the collection relies heavily on early work, the title poem provides an apt theme for the assemblage's ambition. "Singing at the Gates" reads as a welcome update to Corky Gonzales's "I am Joaquín," anthem of the Chicano Movement. This poem's images include women of La Raza and myriad reimagining of ways Chicanas/os endure, from men carrying babies, to Chicanos with backpacks, to abuelas on Harleys. This poem is a testament to the strength of Baca's vision. In attempting to move beyond the stereotypes of culture, class, and gender, Baca has presented the possibility of a thought-provoking reinterpretation of his early work.

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