



Black Mesa Poems

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The Work

Set in the desert of New Mexico, Jimmy Santiago Baca's *Black Mesa Poems* explores the poet's continuing search for connections with his family, home, and cultural heritage. In vivid detail and striking imagery, the loosely connected poems catalog the poet's complex relationships with his past and the home he makes of Black Mesa.

Baca's intricate relationship to the land includes his knowledge of its history. He is keenly aware of the changes the land has gone through and the changes the people of that land have experienced. He writes of his personal sense of connection with arroyos and cottonwoods and of the conflicts between the earlier inhabitants of Black Mesa and the changes brought by progress. Dispossessed migrant workers are portrayed as the price of Anglo progress, and the arid land that once nourished strong cattle now offers only "sluggish pampered globs" from feedlots. Even the once sacred places have been unceremoniously "crusted with housing tracts." His people have been separated from their ancestral land, yet Baca celebrates his identification with the old adobe buildings and Aztec warriors in the face of modern Anglo society.

Despite nostalgia, Baca eludes naïve sentimentality by attaching himself to the land. His sense of self and identity with his race is rooted in the physical landscape of Black Mesa. He evokes a strong connection with the history of his people through rituals, including drum ceremonies that "mate heart with earth." Sketches evoke a rich sense of community life in the barrio. The poet presents himself in terms of his own troubled history, but he knows that the conflict between the "peaceful" man and the "destructive" one of his past is linked to the modern smothering of noisy jet fighters and invading pampered artists looking to his land for a "primitive place."

Memories and images of snapshotlike detail combine in these poems to create a portrait of a man defining himself in relation to his personal and cultural history. The poet knows he is "the end result of Conquistadores, Black Moors, American Indians, and Europeans," and he also notes the continuing invasion of land development. Poems about his children combine memories of his troubled past with Olmec kings and tribal ancestors. The history of his ancestors' relationship with the land informs his complex and evolving sense of identity. Throughout the *Black Mesa Poems*, Baca's personal history becomes rooted in Black Mesa.

Suggested Readings

Levertov, Denise. Introduction to *Martin and Meditations on the South Valley*, by Jimmy Santiago Baca. New York: New Directions, 1987.

Olivares, Julian. "Two Contemporary Chicano Verse Chronicles." *Americas Review* 16 (Fall-Winter, 1988): 214-231.

Rector, Liam. "The Documentary of What Is." *Hudson Review* 41 (Summer, 1989): 393-400.

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