Island of Voice

An Interview with Jimmy Santiago Baca

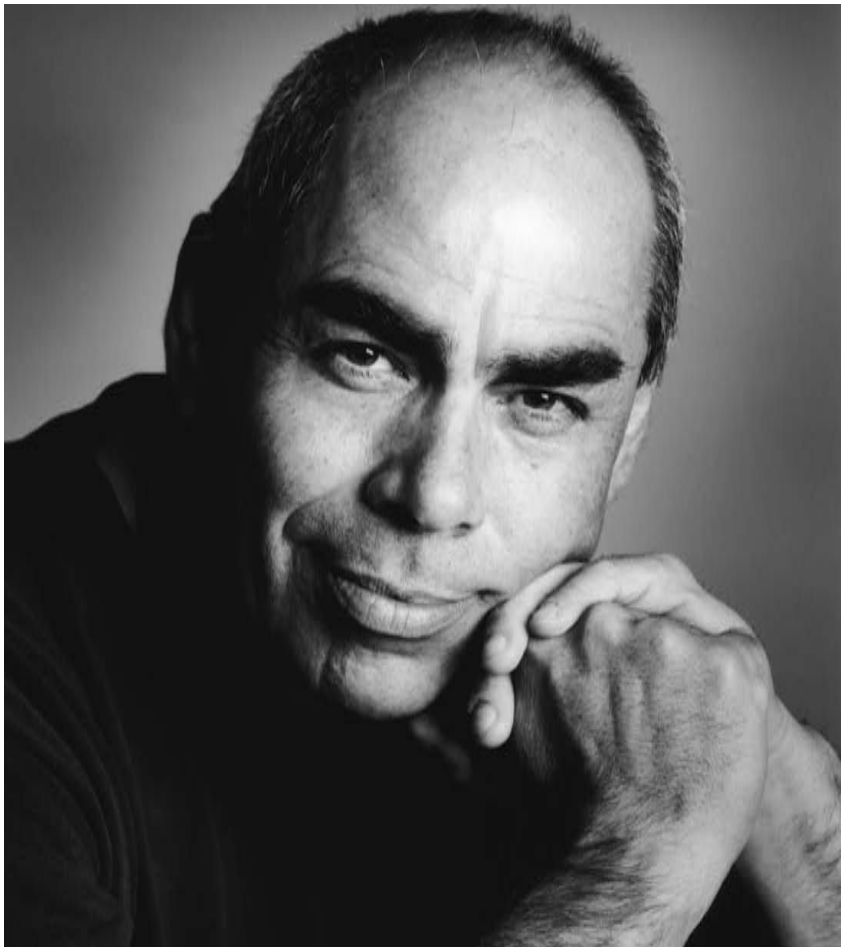
By Dr. Elaine Smokewood, Dr. Harbour Winn, and Ted Stoller

Jimmy Santiago Baca was the featured poet at Oklahoma City University's annual Thatcher Hoffman Smith Distinguished Writer Series in April 2008, supported in part by a grant from OHC. Born in New Mexico of Chicano and Apache descent, Baca became a runaway at age 13. It was after he was sentenced to five years in a maximum-security prison at the age of 21 that Baca began to turn his life around. There he learned to read and write and found his passion for poetry. He is the winner of the Pushcart Prize, the American Book Award, the National Poetry Award, the International Hispanic Heritage Award, and, for his memoir *A Place To Stand*, the prestigious International Award.

Ted Stoller: After mainly writing just poetry, how did you decide to write your memoir?

Jimmy Santiago Baca: When you're writing, if you're honest with yourself, there is this massive gorilla standing in the way, and most writers don't have the courage to take it on, they go around it. That whole prison experience was one that I had to go through, not around; otherwise, I wouldn't have been a writer, or a decent one, so I faced it full on. Ninety percent of all writers go around whatever it is that they need to go through, and that's why you have so much writing that doesn't pertain to much.

Harbour Winn: How do you assume the voices of different sources or persons or ideas? Is that conscious?



JB: It's easy to write with all those voices. The difficult part is to let them speak for themselves; you just act as a channel, that's the hard part. Toni Morrison, Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti, Levertov, all those people were channels; somehow, somewhere, something just went through them and the voices came out of people. It's amazing. But to get to that place, you have to go through about 15 good revisions to really seek out the voice.

What we love, we have no control over. The interesting thing is that we seem to love [writers] who can control the book. They control the book by going into the place they want to write about and meticulously watching. Say you want to write about somebody on death row, and you get a job as a creative writing teacher in a prison. You go every morning with your notebook and watch the death row guy talk and move and ask him, "What's your crime and how'd you do it?" You meticulously write that down. It's not hard to mimic that on a page, you just have to work hard at it. But to access the soul of a killer and write from that place is a whole different kind of literature.

Few people have touched on it. W.H. Lawrence has in some passages. *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald was able to do that when he went to parties—not mimic the party but channel it through his work—and you know this could never be written by anybody else.

I just finished writing a book. I tried to do that. It took me six years to write and, I'm telling you, the characters speak to you. I thought [the book] was done, but I'm in Nicaragua, in this museum interviewing poets from around the world. While they're getting the lights and camera set up, I start walking down this long corridor of pre-Columbian statues. I have this girl named Carmen in the novel and one of her favorite pastimes is to go to the museum. As I was walking down that corridor, what came out of those statues was what they said to her. I felt them saying goodbye to Carmen.

From Winter Poems Along the Rio Grande

By Jimmy Santiago Baca

28.
I am a precarious fellow, on edge
wandering like the river, the way it
sniffs out banks,
floods over into paths,
making hikers slip,
laying low in the shallows,
or asleep with dreams full of smug mud-carp.
I round a hedge-sage wall of dense brush
and spreading out before me unexpectedly I see a bend in the river,
it stuns me
that one day I may be as sincere with myself,
through the changes of being a human being,
turn to see myself
flowing, gracefully as the river.

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Photo By Mike Klemme

I went back to the hotel and wrote that in. All these magical things take place beyond language. This novel, it's 1,600 or 1,700 pages and I got it down to 240, but I'll never forget the distinct moment when I realized, *Wow, that's the protagonist talking to me. She's dead and talking from the spirit world.* I had to go back to the novel and start writing from the spirits. Spirits don't use grammar, they don't use punctuation, and they go way out of the metaphorical surrealism.

HW: You had to write all those pages to get to where that could be channeled?

JB: Oh yeah, I really believe in the channel thing. I wrote the whole thing through first, because I needed to get from the beginning to the end, but the story was all wrong; not the storyline, but the story. It's like you create an island and that island has some bridges you [have] to cross that are really weak. It has a bunch of different animals you have to fight that are really strong and it challenges all the fear you have. You have to stay on that island at night by yourself; but after it's said and done, you come across finding the biggest jewel you ever had.

TS: Your memoir seems very accessible to a male audience, more so than other things that try to be more academic and don't talk about male emotions and violence. Do you feel you are a role model in doing that in your literature?

JB: I just try to write. I don't predicate my writing on any fashionable trend in the literary world. [For example], it's very, very cool to be feminist. I don't know if I'm feminist or the farthest thing from it; I don't know where people are drawing the lines these days. All I know is that a woman is a woman and a man is a man. I write from a male perspective and masculine tone because that's just how I write.

Elaine Smokewood: Talk to us about the relationship of suffering and joy, suffering and beauty, suffering and passion.

JB: I think some of us want to make sense of happiness and suffering, that we're not supposed to suffer, and we translate that into literature. It's a type of literature that doesn't startle the reader, doesn't make the reader fear something. I really like literature that makes people very uncomfortable, and there's none of that going on. Great books make you get out of your comfort zone.

HW: What happens to you when you run? In your poems, it seems to mean so much to you. It must put you in connection with the landscape you're always talking about.

JB: It does. You get to be very intimate and familiar with certain things. It's nice to have beautiful experiences that you work hard to get. Once, I was running in the water and I looked down and there was the biggest fish I've ever seen in my life. I reached slowly down and put my hand in the water and it didn't go away. I reached my hand further into the water and put my hand against its back. I thought if I [told] that story to people they wouldn't believe that I stayed there so long that I became one with the water. It's just unbelievable.

TS: In reading your memoir and poetry, you seem to show incredible emotion and vulnerability. You have experienced extreme circumstances, but, from your earliest poetry to your latest work, that vulnerability never seems to fade as it might in some writers.

JB: Well let me tell you why that vulnerability is there. I can put together a book by mimicking every writer who's on the bestseller list. Ezra Pound spoke about that issue with William Carlos Williams, that idea of mimicking someone's work so you become a master of it. It's the writers who don't mimic the great writers who are groping in the dark, trying to see does this work, does that work. That's why the vulnerability stays, because I refuse to mimic even

myself. I want to do something new every time.

Let me read you something, a new thing called documentary poetry. The style is completely different. Check it out: it's about a white boy who does some serious crazy work: photography, welding, installations in exhibits, charcoal sketches. University of Texas in Austin wanted to do a book on his life, so they recruited some of the great writers from around the world, and they asked me. I don't know how to write about this guy's work, so I said, "I'm gonna write about this the way I think and see. I'm gonna document your work." So here's a document poem:

He's a pothole patcher on the road of love, and the holes go to the center of the earth where he, by fire, learns the craft of an artist. Hibernating in his twig sack, hard nestled in magma mother womb, the hole goes all the way to the other side of earth where hummingbird memories burn bright against the dark. Learns to transform them into the memories: the V8 motor, loved by Elvis and James Dean. He shredded veiled mannerisms, tangled his lungs in flames and color and photos that tied them into a knot until he couldn't breathe and had to breathe sucking sage-rubbed chutes. Submerged in war-jungle waters in his early twenties, seeing life from bloody shores below water where objects waver, butchered parts of animals and children float. Blurred, stacks of despairing hippies, corrupt presidents and broken marriages piled on the banks, his charcoal sketches imagine their agony, his welding torch and grinding blade mimic their screeches, paint brushes splattering their red dreams of hope against the windshield canvas. He learned how his hummingbird heart could hold a redwood tree in one claw, stationary in air. He learned how to use his mind to bring back the cars and trucks droning by in muffled bellows of lonely stretches of Oklahoma roads. Their blurred growl shapes his soul, and he sensed how the world was driven by V8 hunger and V8 vengeance, and he knew the world did not turn on an axis but on the rod projected out from a V8 engine as it spun, pecked, and scratched with razor talons at his face and arms and legs and eyes and tongue and nose until the veneer of flesh that contained his soul peeled away, and he drifted into his colors without pretensions. There was only the cheap, Mexican laborers working stockyards, boxing at night in cantinas, rib-stark steers, weedy jackrabbits with the longest ears, scalded prairie cat type, cowboys in chewed up wind trailers planning on going to Alaska between smoking Pall Malls and sipping wine, worse tasting than goat urine. And the hummingbird flew forth, even deeper into the sorrow of life.

I'm detailing his work. I'm saying, "This is his painting, this is how I see it." Those are documents.

I kinda dig that because poets are documenting the war now. We're not putting in our sensibilities, we're documenting the poverty; we're documenting the Iraq war; we're documenting the Afghanistan sham; we're documenting Bush's presidency; we're documenting it all.

We used to say that was not poetry, the Ernesto Cardinal type of poetry documenting the slaughter of the Nicaraguan Sandinistas. We said, "That's not poetry, it's almost like a political statement." Now all these poets are writing document poetry—for the record, because there is nothing else that will document it. All the records can be changed so easily. We can manipulate imagery on screens now, we can mess with sound. Poets are the only ones who can document it, just like they did when they first wrote poetry. Isn't that cool? I think it's great. ■

Transcribed by Diana Silver and Ted Stoller, OCU students