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on the South Valley*

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BEYOND CULTURAL DIALOGUES: IDENTITIES IN THE INTERSTICES OF CULTURE IN JIMMY SANTIAGO BACA'S *MARTÍN* AND *MEDITATIONS ON THE SOUTH VALLEY*

GEORGE MOORE

Jimmy Santiago Baca has established himself as one of the leading Chicano poets of the American Southwest, in part, perhaps, by his willingness to continue the dialogue between the Spanish and Indian cultures that make up Chicano identity. "I dreamed my spirit was straw and mud," he writes in an epic poem that captures the struggle of these voices,

a pit dug down below my flesh
to pray in,
and I prayed on beads of blue corn kernels,
slipped from thumb to earth
while deerskin drumhead of my heart
gently pounded. . . . (*Martín* 17)

In the lines of his poetry we find the doubled images of indigenous and westernized histories. The exchange is never settled, never fully unified, extending into the contemporary world like voices that haunt and inhabit the author's own voice. But struggle, for Baca, has always been a defining element of his poetry. From his earliest efforts while in prison to his most recent poems and essays, we hear this contingency and debate, an internalized flux of private and public selves that fight anew, each work, reestablishing struggle itself as the history that informs his present culture.

Martín and Meditations on the South Valley is really two poems that refuse to be separated, and in their conjunction as his second major collection, they form a cycle of contrasts and repetitions that emphasize Baca's central concern with dialogue. "*Martín*" presents us with a poetic journey through early life toward adulthood, but in such a way that the forces of difference at the heart of *Martín's* New Mexican surroundings carry the young writer out and away from his homeland. Almost in counterpoint then, "*Meditations on the South Valley*" takes us back toward a reaffirmation of values with *Martín's* return to Albuquerque. Through the process of these poems, Baca

displays a vivid sense of the loss of individual, cultural authority and the establishment of his own identity in the very exchange of ideas that first carry him away and then return him to the site of his cultural past. This movement, and the struggle that characterizes Baca's poetry, calls into question the subjectivity that he creates at the center of the two poems. For the return is also a voyaging outward again, a fragmentation of the singular past into many possible present identities: "For hours I stood there / in silence," he tells us at the opening of the second poem where a fire has destroyed the home he has only just rediscovered, and in this silence he hears "the end / of all the cities and peoples / I had become" (54). It would seem that we must suspend our desires for singularity, for an original self that witnesses change but is never changed, if we are to read and believe the poetic necessities of this voice.

In his recent work on postcolonial discourse, Homi Bhabha suggests that identity today cannot be classified in simple terms of class or gender but must be understood as a dynamic movement in individual and cultural production. We must "think beyond narratives of . . . initial subjectivities," rejecting those notions of identity as something established and unchanging from the inception of the culture and, instead, "focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences" (Bhabha 1). Here, under the postmodern assumption that difference lies at the heart of identity, Bhabha identifies the dynamic of cultural interaction as the location of identity. The same dynamic of cultural articulations must characterize the literature, which is always a primary source of cultural identity.

Baca's *Martín and Meditations on the South Valley* might be read as such an articulation of identity through difference, for the poems continually address the question of ethnicity at the moment of cultural evolution. Between the interpretive poles of the historic and mythic representations of Aztlán as place of Chicano origin, and within the framework of a contemporary poetics of identity based on cultural displacement, Baca performs what Bhabha calls an "on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation" (2). Baca addresses the conditions of Chicano identity by suggesting his experience of the culture as an articulation of difference. The interstices, or "in-between' spaces" of cultural interaction, according to Bhabha, open up a "terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood" (2, 1). Baca's

poetry immediately evokes such a terrain, for as a writer he struggles to redefine relationships among older categories of racial and cultural identities and does so without discarding them. Indeed, he works to keep the dialogue of these older identities alive. Baca demonstrates the need for a dynamic of cultural influences to sustain differences of selfhood even into future constructions of culture. His “in-between spaces” are voiced through a culturally forged poetic, a strategy of language that works within or *out of* the interstices Bhabha suggests. Both individual and communal, these notions of selfhood create new possibilities of cultural identity by opening “innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (Bhabha 1–2).

The premise that identities are not established phenomena but rather dynamic sites where cultures conflict underlines the idea of the new dialogic model. No longer a purely Bakhtinian intertextual exchange of voices informing a work, this new dialogue rises out of what Bhabha calls “the overlap and displacement of domains of difference” (2).¹ We discover a problem, however, in reading Baca’s poetry through Bhabha’s brand of difference. How are we to justify viewing Chicano literature as postcolonial when Chicano culture is both colonial and precolonial? Might not Bhabha’s critique of colonialism inadvertently, in this new application, reestablish the desire for an original culture? We find an answer in the fact that Chicano culture can be said to identify equally with both sides of its historical conflict. The dynamics of this history to the present day show that Chicano writers have continued to struggle with the relationship between the indigenous and colonial forces within their culture.

Chicano critic Rafael Pérez-Torres correctly suggests that we must see Chicano poetry as in many ways informing postcolonial discourse rather than the inverse, for poetry like Baca’s takes form as a cultural product of colonial struggle.² “Not simply trendy theoretical positions grafted onto the Chicano,” Pérez-Torres insists, “postmodernism and postcolonialism stake out critical realms that Chicano cultures traverse” (4). The internalization of colonialism, therefore, at the heart of Chicano identity formation often causes a conflict of desires (Pérez-Torres 8). Postcolonial theory, it might be reasoned, outlines an internalized struggle that creates the inherently dialogic nature of poetry like Baca’s. Pérez-Torres warns that the writer’s flux of desires to identify somehow with both colonial and “precolonial” forces can lead at times to “the uncritical (and often reified) reclamation of the Aztec”

which "comes dangerously close to being a blithe and uninformed celebration of anything non-Western" (9). The danger, then, is that postcolonial theory as a political practice might foster a tendency to identify solely with the indigenous side of one's culture. But as Pérez-Torres concludes, "The tension between the precolonial and the colonial forms the postcolonial space that affords a critical lens by which to understand the production of Chicano cultural identity" (9). Such a tension not only creates in its contingencies the location of culture for those like Baca, but likewise informs the strategies of dialogic interaction within the poetry. What emerges through this dialogue of historical and present-day influences is a poetry that reflects Chicano struggles both in its content and in its form.

Aztlán is one such moment of dialogic emergence in Baca's work, for the idea of a Chicano homeland becomes a symbolic representation of cultural interaction at the most fundamental stage of identity formation; and a closer look at how Aztlán informs and even questions the idea of identity within the poems may help us understand Baca's concerns in the face of continued cultural evolution. If in an even greater context, then, we consider Chicano culture itself as the space, or "interstices," of overlapping domains of Indio-European culture, we can ask of Baca's work what Bhabha would ask of interacting communities, specifically: "How do strategies of representation or empowerment come to be formulated in the competing claims of communities where, despite shared histories of deprivation and discrimination, the exchange of values, meanings and priorities may not always be collaborative and dialogical, but may be profoundly antagonistic, conflictual and even incommensurable?" (2). Both the Spanish and the indigenous strains of Chicano culture must compete for recognition in American society; Baca's strategy seems to be to evoke the conflicts of the past in the context of the present in order to sustain the dialogue and yet pay tribute to the earlier identities of these two cultures. In turning to Baca's poetry we find the internalization of these conflicts produces another level of community, where the poet forges a model of selfhood based not only on cultural history but on an awareness of historical interaction.³

With this sense of dialogue at the heart of Baca's "Martín" and "Meditations on the South Valley," then, the idea of Aztlán takes on new significance as a pivotal moment in the poetic discourse, representing both a conventional history informing the writer's identity and the possibility of continued cultural exchange. In the "Glossary

of Spanish Terms” that accompanies Baca’s collection of essays, *Working in the Dark*, “Aztlán” is identified as the “Aztec mythological ‘land to the north,’ believed to refer to the southwestern United States” (167). The fact that Baca here reinscribes the Mexican mythology of Aztlán within the geographic history of the American Southwest seems natural enough, for Chicano writers since Alurista in the 1970s have made an effort to incorporate the origin myth into contemporary Chicano poetics (Candelaria 73). Baca relocates the Aztec place of emergence to coincide with his own regional identity by simply establishing a home for the ancient mythology in one of the major centers of Chicano culture today. As Michael Pina points out, this appropriation of the Aztec homeland for Chicano nationalism was one of the primary unifying factors in the Chicano movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s (36).⁴ Aztlán therefore becomes a necessary, if somewhat indefinite, cultural symbol. The historic Aztlán, however, “stands in contrast to the archaic consciousness from which the *sacred history* of Aztlán issued,” Pina writes; and, in fact, the continued search for such history produces “the antagonistic analytical study of its historical nature” (16, 17). Many 1970s historians, then, seemed to challenge the Chicano movement’s appropriation of indigeneity.

Chicano writers have drawn from a number of sources for their understanding of the Aztlán tradition. Since the eighteenth century, historians have argued over references to Aztlán in earlier sources such as Fray Bernardino de Sahagún’s *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*, written in 1569; and Toribio Motolinia’s *History of the Indians of New Spain*, written in the late 1530s. Their debate centers on whether such references were intended as cultural history or historical fact. In the nineteenth century, historians generally assumed that early mentions of Aztlán referred to Tenochtitlan (now Mexico City), the capital city of the Aztec, which was located on an island in Lake Texcoco; this interpretation coincides with Aztec legends of an ancient homeland on an island surrounded by lakes (Fagan 49–50). Contemporary historians seem to favor a mixture of myth and history, arguing that the location of Aztlán must be connected to the pre-Tenochtitlan migrations of the Mexica, or Aztec; at the same time, they concede that the literature builds on an understanding of “homeland” as a place of origin (Fagan 50). This historic/mythic interpretive reading places Aztlán at the center of a complex set of attitudes that diversify and multiply the Indio-



LEGEND OF MONTEZUMA

From the cover of William G. Ritch's *Aztlán: The History, Resources, and Attractions of New Mexico* (1885, 6th ed.; reprint of *Illustrated New Mexico*), a promotional book intended to entice tourists and settlers to New Mexico, this illustration represents Ritch's interpretation of the "legend of Montezuma." In this legend, Montezuma is born in a region known in pre-Columbian times as Aztlán, in the pueblo of Teguayo, or Santa Fe. After selecting Malinche, "a maiden from the great pueblo of Zuni," for Montezuma's queen, the Great Spirit sends to him an eagle "for him to ride in his exploration of his dominions, and eventually guide him to the place where he would found his future capital and metropolis." The eagle flies with him to the "pueblo of Tenochtitlan, or the City of Mecitl, or Mexico," where Montezuma founds the Aztec civilization.

Montezuma and the eagle thus span the Rio Grande and represent Aztlán's ties to Mexico. When the great eagle reached the spot of the Aztec capital, he alighted on a prickly pear and seized a serpent in his beak, an image "recognized in the coat of arms of the Republic of Mexico."

European origins of Mexican American culture. At the very least, Aztlán is a mythology with historical roots, for historians generally believe the site of this center of Aztec nationalism was located somewhere in north central Mexico.

Don Fernando de Alvarado Tezozomoc's 1609 document, *Cronica Mexicayotl*, supports the idea of Aztlán as the Mexica's original homeland. It identifies Aztlán as the place where the Mexica people emerged from the seven caves of the rock they called "Chicomoztoc." This mountainous rock had "holes on seven sides," according to Tezozomoc, "and from there came forth the Mexicans, carrying their women, when they came out of Chicomoztoc by pair." He goes on to tell us that this "was a fearsome place, for there abounded the countless wild beasts established in the area" and that it was "full of thorns, of sweet agave, and of pastures; and being thus very far-off, no one still knew later where it was" (qtd. in Fagan 51). Historically, the Mexica were nomads, displaced by the cultural disruptions that accompanied the last years of the Tolteca, and were said "to have wandered widely in the northern reaches of the Basin of Mexico" (Fagan 53).

Here, Aztlán is portrayed in all its complexities as both a source of life in the imagery of emergence and as a source of terror in the symbolism of wilderness. At the heart of the mythology, then, is already a complex symbol of origins; one not easily reduced to a monolithic source. Furthermore, according to Fagan, the Mexica themselves were most likely "a heterogeneous group of at least seven clans" at the time of the emergence (51). Finally, it appears that the Aztec immigrants were not exactly welcomed to the Tolteca, for the Texcoco lake area was already densely populated. "As the last group to enter this area," Pina writes, "the Aztecs were seen as intruders and were driven from place to place within the lake region" (20). In effect, the Aztec conquered, by slow accretion, the declining empire of the Toltec and added to the Toltec displacement; at the same time they intermingled with the more advanced Toltec civilization, which suggests a biculturalism at the heart of Indio-Mexican origins.

It is easy to see that the historical ground for this mythology is already involved in interpretive debates over origin and identity and that history itself continues to unsettle monocultural ideas of identity formation. In contrast to the more common nationalistic and monocultural uses of the mythology twenty years ago, Baca's poetry reconfigures the myth of Aztlán as a site of cultural dialogue and as a collocation of diverse identities. His particular use of Indio-European influences in *Martín and Meditations on the South Valley* demonstrates an awareness of this multiplicity as essential if we are to sustain the renewable nature of cultural heredity. Baca at points seems to play

upon this feeling of indeterminacy by drawing from classical references that can be viewed in different or even opposing ways. In poem XXV of "Meditations on the South Valley," for instance, the poet suggests—both by the personification of the Río Grande as "El Agua" and through the fierce imagery of the Mexica's violent, warrior history—that this mythic past is not always a source of personal power and support:

blackened hair on the Water's face,
as it became a gold mask
with two obsidian eyes,
opening its mouth to swallow Benny,
crushing his young brown body
in its swaying-blue claws. (91)

Baca is apt to draw on Aztec imagery as both a symbol of power within the culture and as a sign of the dangerous implications of Chicano self-identification with the ancient warrior class. Ethnicity, in this complex interaction of pasts and presents in cultural dialogue, becomes a question of continuing self-formation rather than a moment of historical or mythic self-awareness. In what might be seen as a moment of dislocation, Baca confronts the Aztec symbolism as yet another danger among the powerful forces threatening individuals within the Chicano culture.

This sense of cultural dilemma coincides with Michael M. J. Fischer's suggestion that what contemporary ethnic literary works

bring home forcefully is, *first*, the paradoxical sense that ethnicity is something reinvented and reinterpreted in each generation by each individual and that it is often something quite puzzling to the individual, something over which he or she lacks control. Ethnicity is not something that is simply passed on from generation to generation, taught and learned; it is something dynamic, often unsuccessfully repressed or avoided. (195)

Although Baca does not avoid his ethnicity in these poems, neither does he reduce cultural identity to a simple matter of inheritance. Instead, he actively avoids the commonly held "truths" of a historically based, cultural autonomy popular in the decades preceding his present work. The dialogue I have suggested, however, under Bhabha's sense of the interstices created by communities' differences, supports

Fischer's notion of a "paradoxical sense [of] ethnicity" and the writer's "lack of control" over that same cultural identification.

We can see a double sense of history in Baca's particular use of the more contemporary sense of Aztlán mythology. Historians locate the home of the first Aztec groups more generally toward the northwestern edge of the Basin of Mexico, perhaps as close to the coast as Lake Mexcaltitlan but more probably in the area of the ancient capital of Tenochtitlan. Chicano poets, according to Cordelia Candelaria, assume this connection with the Mexican site as a way of communicating "a sense of the uninterrupted continuum of human experience from the earliest legends about Aztlán to the Chicano adaptations of the meaning of Aztlán for contemporary purposes—a millennium's span in time, a continent's span in space" (74–75). But what might be seen as a cultural continuum is in effect a geographic dislocation, and one that emphasizes to some extent the dislocations of culture at the center of Baca's experience.

The contemporary Chicano experience is one of struggle and survival connected to a specific locale for Baca in these poems. Martín himself journeys outward into America at one point only to return to Albuquerque in order to emphasize, as it were, the importance of an identity with place. Baca's personal interpretation of the mythic center of Chicano identity always remains essentially both enlightening and terrifying, for individual and community alike, and related to the greater Aztec symbols of violence and independence hidden in common, everyday experiences. Baca also uses the myth to reinforce a sense of regionalism and to suggest the ties of Chicano culture to both Latin and North American place-names. But these ideas work primarily in a symbolic context, where his present-day culture regenerates its identity specifically through southwest regional associations. The geography of home stands for the First World and for the first peoples at the time of the emergence, be they Aztec or "tribal Apache," as in Baca's own father's lineage. Chicano regionalism, such as Baca's, also supports a rebellion against the fundamental structures of capitalism; in forming identities through mythic/historical ties, writers would deny the notion of land as property, establishing a sense of place that in effect reverses ownership and makes the people a natural extension of the geographical identity. In short, the use of Aztlán from the beginning has fulfilled political as well as spiritual needs.

Representing Baca's personal history, Martín speaks of a diversity of familial influences in his life that correspond with the complexi-



AZTLÁN (1985; Rio Grande Apts., City of El Paso, later painted over). 24' x 24'.

In this mural, Chicano youth demonstrate their attraction for Aztec warrior symbolism in a neighborhood mural project supervised by Manuel G. Acosta, who said, "The theme is from the poster by Helguera. . . . All of a sudden, they were all copying him: the warrior with the maiden fainting down" (Miguel Juárez, *Colors on Desert Walls: The Murals of El Paso* 69). Courtesy Texas Western Press.

ties of Aztec mythology. He sees his father's Apache heritage and his mother's Mexican American background not only as distinctive ethnicities, but as different social classes. According to Gabriel Meléndez, Baca's father's bourgeois status and his mother's rural poverty are as much a part of his poetry as are their racial differences ("Jimmy" 22).

In "Martín," the first of the two interrelated longer poems, Martín complains that he was

Caught between Indio-Mejicano rural uncles
 who stacked hundred pound sacks of pinto beans
 on boxcars all day . . .
 . . . and Chavez uncles and aunts
 who vacationed and followed the Hollywood model
 of My Three Sons for their own families. (17)

His father's family has achieved middle-class status, while his mother's side of the family—the Indio-Mejicano, with its links to Aztec origins—lives in poverty. Martín cannot seem to come to terms with the silent portions of his father's past and thinks of him as "set adrift in darkness, / no tribal magnetic field / to point the way" (29). Martín calls himself a "de-tribalized Apache" and laments that he is

entangled in the rusty barbwire of a society I do not
 understand,
 Mejicano blood in me spattering like runoff water
 from a roof canale, glistening over the lives
 who lived before me, like rain over mounds of
 broken pottery,
 each day backfills with brown dirt of my dreams. (19)

The dispersal imagery is unmistakable, as is the tone of lost culture. Dialogue here conforms to the more powerful antagonistic and conflictual elements in counterpoise.

Candelaria suggests that in order to counter this kind of fragmentation of identity Chicano poets search for symbols that will help them unify the diversity of cultures in which they live. But it seems a sense of cultural fragmentation or heterogeneity remains a source of Baca's poetic power. He draws, at times, from a wide range of disparate influences to create a dynamic sense of Chicano identity. For many of these Chicano poets, Candelaria writes, the use of a "bilingual or multilingual idiom" combines with "reference to *raza* food and folkways, to customs, religion, and to history which evidences a recognizable synthesis of the many cultures out of which Chicanos emerged" (75). Baca's particular dialogical poetic, however, seems to suggest far less synthesis and more continued struggle among past and present cultural forces.

Homi Bhabha gives us access to this complex sense of trans-culturalization performed by individual writers in their attempts to

forge a pluralistic identity out of an uncertain past and an alienated present. "The 'right' to signify from the periphery of authorized power and privilege," Bhabha writes,

does not depend on the persistence of tradition; it is resourced by the power of tradition to be reinscribed through the conditions of contingency and contradictoriness that attend upon the lives of those who are "in the minority." The recognition that tradition bestows is a partial form of identification. In restaging the past it introduces other, incommensurable cultural temporalities into the invention of tradition. This process estranges any immediate access to an originary identity or a "received" tradition. (2)

Tradition therefore, in Bhabha's estimation, does not exist outside the dynamic of its evolution into modern awareness, cannot be reduced to a set of standards or values. Instead it must be recognized, as in Baca's poetry, as a force, a "restaging of the past," that already undergoes revision into a contemporary element in the play of forces that produce identities.

The rights granted through this reinscription of one's tradition are perhaps—at least in Baca's case—the rights of authorship. In his poetry, tradition establishes itself in the present as a matrix of interpretive possibilities that might be read regionally as well as historically, particularly in the case of Aztlán. In connection with the many-clanned nature of the Mexica at the time of their emergence, we also find strong evidence that the clans did not generate certain stories in the Aztec mythology at all but rather borrowed them from the Toltec and other sources. Early Catholic chroniclers then further altered myths associated with Aztlán. Nigel Davies suggests that among the prejudices of these early chroniclers "was the principle of monogenesis," an idea originating with the book of Genesis, which "states that all humankind had a common origin." Control of origins seems to be one of the primary arguments used to dislocate indigenous cultures. "Hence it was believed," Davies continues, "that the inhabitants of America must have crossed the sea to reach the New World"—for the Alaskan land route was at the time unknown. The sea-crossing tales are necessary for these mostly religious chroniclers, Davies says, because it would have been "rank heresy" to suggest that the Mexica might have been "an independent development of mankind in the New World" (15). Aztlán, then, in contemporary parlance becomes a symbol denying the transoceanic "migration"

For Baca, in "Meditations on the South Valley," the connection is through the central symbolism of region to a more general consciousness of earth elements as a ground for Chicano identity. In dreaming himself back into his cultural past, Martín conceives of himself as

Baca integrates cultural symbols with a recurrent earth imagery, establishing place and ancestry as interwoven discourses of the past. But the integration of such symbols often occurs at moments of contemporary alienation, as in Eddie's suicide, where

Nature imagery therefore performs in the double role as mythic/historic connection and present-day physical barrier.

a semblance
of land and life so bleak,

bleak to its core,
each slice of life's juicy meat
tossed out, dry and infertile as cattle carcass
gnawed by wolves on some destitute plain. (*Immigrants* 69)

Or the landscape itself becomes a prison, representing an awareness of interior distance the poet recognizes as part of his evolving cultural identity. "I looked long at the walls, at the bars, at the bobwire," he writes, "I looked long out over them to the distance / and beyond, to the horizon, / and knew I would die here," only to be reborn, he tells us, with this awareness at the core of his new image of self (*Immigrants* 67).

Yet in *Martín and Meditations on the South Valley*, the earth imagery more often returns us to a pervasive sense of region and history. Aztlán remains for the most part a silent symbol, with the word itself appearing infrequently but the mythological sense of it organizing much of the imagery of the two poems. As he watches two gangs fight, Martín wonders if these actions are not somehow destinies foreshadowed "under the fierce glare of sun / in the Aztlán desert" (84). Elsewhere, Aztlán materializes in the sense of *mestizaje*, which Candelaria defines as a

genetic blending of Indian with Spanish racial features and the bi-culturalism that results from that blending. . . . Chicanos have increasingly come to use the term more comprehensively than its original meaning to refer to the syncretion of all the manifold cultural elements present within the culture, including not only the Indian and Spanish but also the Moorish influences in Spain from the eighth to the thirteenth centuries and the Anglo-American from the modern period. (75)

At the opening of the poem, Martín sees his image in a photo album where he finds "the strange actors of my mestizo familia / bowed before me wearing vaquero costumes, / mechanic overalls and holding hoes in fields" (4). The ethnic and class distinctions are only part of a greater mixture of influences, however, and his Apache/Aztec/Indio-Mejicano/Spanish identity verifies an evolving sense of *mestizaje*.

In a recent essay, Baca conjures up an even greater range of cultures reinforcing again the geographic, rather than purely ethnic, sense of his own identity. "Chicano culture," he writes,

a veil over the jade mask of our Mayan heart, merges the present with the primordial past in our experience. . . . In my Chicano blood many tributaries meet—the blood of silver-mine Mexican-Indian slaves, of Mexican shepherders and Apache warriors, of French trappers and Spanish conquistadors. (*Working* 97)

These “tributaries” are not simply complementary influences realized through the poet’s history but forces that recount the struggle of competing cultures that carries on into the present. Baca suggests a continuation of these interactions in “Martín,” where the narrator confronts his fragmentary personal history, captured through an interplay of cultural images:

Each night I could hear the silver whittling blade
of La Llorona,
carving a small child on the muddy river bottom,
like a little angel carved into ancient church doors.
On Fridays, Jesus Christ appeared
on La Vega road, mounted on a white charger,
his black robe flapping in the moonlight
as he thrashed through bosque brush.
Sometimes Walleí, the voice of water, sang to me,
and Mectálla, who lives in the fire, flew in the air,
and Cuzál, the Reader of Rocks, spoke with a voice
jagged as my street-fighting knuckles. (20)

The traditional weeping woman of Spanish folklore, La Llorona, who has murdered her children and now eternally cries for them, mingles with the image of Jesus on the road, in black robe—certainly a Franciscan allusion—and is finally juxtaposed with the Aztec mythologies of Walleí, Mectálla, and Cuzál.

The temporal progression of these images suggests another dimension of the poem’s complexity. From the “each night” appearance of La Llorona to the “Fridays” of Christ’s appearance to the “sometimes” of the older mythologies, the passage moves from specific moments and days to the more pervasive and perhaps mythic associations of Aztec time. Certainly the progression suggests the enduring nature of the older, indigenous influences while the Aztec earth imagery fulfills the poet’s demands for an earth-based regionalism. Christianity has no such sacred locale in the New World; the Spanish in Mexican history, no matter what the extent of their

antiquity in Mesoamerica, are still a colonial influence, a force from outside. Even with these various elements contributing to the dialogic nature of the poems, Baca comes back repeatedly to the Aztec historic/mythic elements in order to confirm his sense of an inclusive Chicano history.

Before returning to Albuquerque, Martín travels into the Manzano mountains and has a momentary revelation, or spiritual experience, in the Quaraí ruins south of the city. Quaraí represents a pivotal moment of personal and cultural renewal, but readers will also be aware that the experience brings together, once again, many of the elements associating the two poems. The progression of the poems carries Martín from the fragmentary experiences of his early life through a number of cultural encounters that highlight his own difference to a point of possible reconciliation. He does not reach, however, a true synthesis, for the struggle continues on into the future, and at best he can but “. . . be strong and listen, and follow” (40). As if to emphasize the ongoing interactions here, the Quaraí ruins



Quaraí, located fifty miles south of Albuquerque. Ruins of the Catholic mission Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción de Cuarac sit atop older pueblo ruins. © 1994, photograph by David Wakely.

segment of the poem again mixes symbols—in this case, culled from the site in New Mexico which boasts two, or three, of its own distinct histories.

Entering the Manzano mountains on his motorcycle one morning after a journey across the United States, Martín senses in the Quaraí ruins a personification of ancient forces, perhaps animistic and certainly spiritual, that he feels might help guide his life. He speaks to the ruins as “Quaraí,” an ancient figure or deity and certainly the manifestation of diverse cultural pasts:

O QUARAÍ! Shape
the grit and sediment I am,
mineral de Nuevo Mejico.

I will learn the dark red Apache words
and wind burnished chants,
the blazed red Spanish names of things
that absorb centuries in my blood. (39)

The poet works toward fusion here, symbolized by both his father's Apache ancestry, rooted in the southern portions of the state, perhaps in the Mescalero Apache communities and reservation not far from the ruins today, and the “Spanish names” from his mother's Mexican American heritage. The juxtaposition suggests Martín's personal history now transposed onto the history of the community itself. And the regional struggle becomes the poet's own as he accepts the call to change his life through an awareness of the histories that precede him.

The Quaraí ruins represent more here, however, than indigenous strains in the state's history; they symbolize *mestizaje*, a physical space that captures the interweave of three distinct cultures. The ruins of the old Catholic mission built in the 1620s and inhabited by Franciscans for fifty years, sit upon older pueblo ruins from the twelfth or thirteenth century. These older ruins are themselves a source of some mystery; anthropologists attribute them either to the Anasazi or Mogollon ancestors of regional inhabitants today (see Josephy 152–53). Most likely, these Indians were of the Tiwa language group, themselves perhaps Mogollon influenced by Anasazi customs. The Catholic presence here began with Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción de Cuarac, a large church whose ruins still dominate the site at Quaraí. The name “Cuarac” seems to have changed through Spanish influence. First mentioned as “Querac” in

1628 by a priest at the convento, it later became Quaraí and by then was associated with both the pueblos and the mission (Wilson 3–4).

The ruins represent a forced mingling of two cultures, with a third silently protruding from the older remnants of walls and firepits. Baca makes little effort here to establish a hierarchy of cultural influences. Instead, he creates the impression of heterogeneity and grants the anthropomorphic and deified image of “Quaraí” the power to hear his confession. To this figure, then, he addresses his desires and promises for the future, bringing together through his voiced commitment to himself and his culture certain elements from the earlier parts of the poem: we find reference to both his parental lines and to his new-found sense of regionalism, as well as a pervasive but subtle extension of Aztec symbolism into his present circumstances.

In an interview, Baca commented on the interrelated aspects of region and history, and on the spiritual power of sites such as Quaraí. “I think that when you live your life in such a way where it connects to the pre-Columbian past,” he said, “where when I walk around the road of Black Mesa where I live, and I see the Black Mesa there, a dormant volcano. I see all the people that came before me and how their lives must have been lived in reverence to this volcano” (Meléndez, “Carrying the Magic” 72). But Baca also understands that the spiritual aspects of his experience in the Quaraí ruins must relate back to the day-to-day dynamics of Chicano society and to his personal history if they are to go beyond a nostalgia for some lost wholeness of identity. So here he forges a new realism in the midst of the symbolic structures of Quaraí by envisioning his grandparents at work in the fields at the entrance to the mountain site. “At the foothills,” he writes, “my grandmother herded sheep / and my grandfather planted corn y chile” (Martín 38). This image once again evokes Apache culture with its ties to the sacred importance of corn, and it evokes Aztec culture through similar associations. Corn seems to represent a central symbol of exchange, for we know it as one of the major contributions of the Anasazi to Mogollon culture in southern New Mexico.

Significantly, the site of Martín’s moment of witness—for this is certainly the nature of his confession and promise—is not the La Purísima Concepción mission ruins but one of the round “rock-pit” ruins, “hollowed in the earth.” Praying within this ancient circle, he promises to raise his future children in the old ways, “to teach them the old names of things,” he says, “and pray to the four directions”

(39). He also hints that he has confronted this spiritual guide before and failed to accomplish his goals. "I will not run," he says, "when You appear to me / as I did when younger, O QUARAÍ. / I will be strong and listen, and follow" (40). The sense of continuing struggle connects this new commitment to his past life, out of which he must now move if he is to achieve anything more than memories of a past disrupted by doubts and confusion. The oral dimension of this experience in the poem shows Baca's awareness of a tradition that precedes even the chronicles of Sahagún and Motolinia. And still, the identity formation taking place here seems to challenge a simple reading of the bicultural moment, refusing to be encapsulated in either historical circumstance or earlier Chicano movement rhetoric. Candelaria suggests that the "universality of *mestizaje*" culture creates situations where, as in Alurista's poetry, we find an integration of even "Mexican mythology with Eastern and Christian lore" (4). Baca goes perhaps even further, suggesting, in a recent essay,

We are the weave of two rivers joined to create the braided cord of *chicanismo*. . . . [O]ur branches go out into both worlds, the indigenous and the European. Yet our homeland is under us. We stand on it, till it, harvest from it, tend its irrigation ditches. . . . My memories are Aztlán torches that still flicker through all the stormy onslaughts of the invading occupiers of my land, still burn with their glowing earth connection. (*Working* 82)

We might yet hear echoes of the biculturalism here, but Baca also acknowledges that these cultures are never easily identified as separate entities in the present moment. In a challenge to the oversimplified images of cultural nationalism, he transforms historical instances like "the stormy onslaughts of the invading occupiers" into contemporary signs of oppression. Merging past with present, he creates a basis for Chicano identity where ancient civilizations become an internalized symbol of present-day conflicts centering on racism and civil liberties in the Southwest, a place where "wounds of greed score our lands" and "our warriors were cut down by government-sanctioned bullets" (*Working* 82).

After the Quaraí experience, Martín returns to Albuquerque in search of Gabriela, his future wife; he also begins at this point a process of rebuilding. These acts of reaffirmation, after his transcontinental journey and the purgative experiences at Quaraí, also

suggest the greater social dimensions of the second poem. Many of the numbered sections—what might be called separate poems—in “Meditations on the South Valley” represent a greater awareness of social responsibility and community action. The diversity of cultures remains, however; and Baca builds a mosaic of influences here by interlocking motifs and dramatic tensions which then sustain a dialogue of cultural, economic, and geographic differences between the two poems.

The first poem initially portrays Martín’s family as dysfunctional even as he himself realizes the fragmentary nature of his identity. He sees this dysfunction in historical terms: the forces behind his culture have contributed to the divisions in his family and society. The challenge that Baca finds here is creating a poetic that addresses both the positive and negative aspects of Martín’s circumstances. For each of the sections exploring violence, poverty, or loss of culture, he presents us with moments expressing the powerful regenerative spirit in the Chicano community. The balance of losses and affirmations is then aligned with certain poetic techniques which reinforce differences between realistic and symbolic modes of representation in the poetry. So when we hear, in one of the more powerful segments of the second poem, that Eddie “blew his head off / playing chicken,” we find that the poet eulogizes him as a warrior, whose blood spotted

sidewalks,
smeared shovel handles,
coated knife blades,
blurred your eyes and painted your body
in a tribal-barrio dance
to set yourself free,
to know what was beyond the boundaries
you were born into. (64)

The contrast between senseless death and warrior spirit informs the greater struggle of the poem. The section following Eddie’s demise takes a brief look at young boys on the street today, where the poet sees “. . . Cuauhtémoc—images / that reflect gold-cuts / engraved on medallions / in Spanish museums” (67). These are “Vatos,” Baca tells us, in whom we must finally “. . . see / a distant relative / of Aztec warriors” (68). The hope reflected in the strength of this coming generation overshadows the tragedy of Eddie’s senseless death.

Baca configures much of “Meditations on the South Valley” in this way, with tragedy and death, or weary struggles against poverty

and racism, contrasted with moments of cultural strength, identification with the earth and its natural elements, and expressions of the power of ancient cultures. Again, the Aztec symbolism that informs these passages works to heighten the sense of duality in historical forces, showing us that the warrior past represents both strengths and dangers for individuals in the culture.

Another context for the splitting of cultural identities, however, involves the two poems as halves of Martín's ongoing experience with cultural binarism as he experiences it. The divisions that Martín realizes now become the basis for a class struggle within his society, as well as for interactions between the Chicano community and mainstream American culture. When Martín's house burns and he must move from the South Valley barrio to the middle-class Heights, he becomes disoriented and then alienated by a class-conscious double image of his own culture. He complains of the "ceramic faces of women" and the "buddha-cheeked men" who seem to have no comprehension of the barrio he has come from or of what makes it vibrantly alive, and Martín laments that "the white dove of my mind flies, / searching for news of life" (55). Furthermore, these moments cause him to remember past experiences when he struggled with differences between his father's and mother's socioeconomic circumstances:

I was caught in the middle—
between white skinned, English speaking altar boy
at the communion railing,
and brown skinned, Spanish speaking plains nomadic child
with buffalo heart groaning underworld earth powers. (16)

Finally, these divisions, in turn, reinforce a sense of alienation that has grown with the child/poet since his earliest family experiences, "between Chavez bourgeois in the city," he says, "and rural Lucero sheepherders" (16).

When Martín must temporarily relocate from the Southside to the Heights—a move that suggests geographic differences as well as an internalized distance experienced within himself—he is thrown back on aspects of his culture that he cannot reconcile with that deeper sense of the indigenous. The middle-class lives symbolically in the "heights" above the urban center, in contrast to "La gente del Southside," where, in order to return, he must journey " . . . down, down / into the green jungly growths / of their worlds," with imagery of Aztec environments (56). Martín further internalizes the divisions

of his culture when one of his new neighbors in the Heights, seeing his "56 Chevy truckita," calls to him that the trees in the front of the apartment building need trimming, mistaking him for a gardener. Martín realizes that in the Valley his truck "... symbolizes prestige / and in the Heights, poverty," and that "worth is determined in the Valley / by age and durability, / and in the Heights, by newness / and impression" (59). Here the conflicts between cultures are transformed, or reformed, by the realities of economic difference, where one element in his culture becomes distinguished from others by the very advantages he associates with Anglo-American society.

As a final point, the two poems are also dialogic in the new sense in their overall movements and conflicts. The narrative of "Martín" represents an introspective dimension of individualized experience, focusing on his journey toward self-awareness as a culturally based phenomenon and concluding with his building his own house. The house links the two poems, with the fire that destroys it actually occurring sometime between the chronological sequences of the two separate poems. Symbolically, and ceremonially, the house represents Martín's construction of an identity based on a new regional and cultural understanding. The second poem, "Meditations on the South Valley," then projects these early personal experiences out into the community, focusing on events and characters from Martín's past and those who interact with him after he resettles in Albuquerque. A momentary and episodic dimension overrides the narrative or sequential aspects in the second poem, and Baca seems to have needed a poetic that might somehow supersede the inherent limits of conventional epic form. Epic is certainly what he attempts to achieve with the movements of Martín's early life; but the cultural history then cannot be complete without the community identification so central to the Chicano experience. The distinct nature of the poems reflects this difference once more. The narrative form of "Martín," the tale of his early personal history, contrasts with the lyric nature of the individual sections in "Meditations on the South Valley." Baca seems to want to suggest an ongoing interaction between individual and society and to sustain the tensions that develop between socially determined roles, family ties, and the greater cultural past.

In the end, the poems represent a rich multiplicity of cultural influences, and Baca makes every effort to include among these the Aztec world transformed by interpretation and the re-imaging of

Aztlán as place, the force of Spanish colonialism and its revisions to Indio-Mejicano history, the personal ties to land and to sites of historical identity such as the Quaraí ruins, the disintegration of the family and its already complex cultural antecedents, as well as the continuing conditions of poverty and isolation within a society reflecting the struggle between traditional and modern forces. To the poet's credit, these struggles are not resolved by poetic means but continue to work toward future understandings of identity, even those he feels are "full of insecurities" and "replete with contradictions" (*Working* 83).

In reference to a poem by Bombay poet Adil Jussawalla, Bhabha suggests, "In the postcolonial text the problem of identity returns as a persistent questioning of the frame, the space of representation, where the image . . . is confronted with its difference, its Other" (46). This questioning works as well for poets who must experience the forces of both the colonial and postcolonial as elements of their own history. Jussawalla sees himself as "invisible" in the moment of the bourgeois colonialist's existence; Baca may see himself finally emerging from the darkness of cultural difference to find that conflict is yet the defining nature of that identity in Otherness. "What is interrogated," Bhabha explains, "is not simply the image of the person, but the discursive and disciplinary place from which questions of identity are strategically and institutionally posed" (47). Baca would surely agree, for the two poems, "Martín" and "Meditations on the South Valley," make evident not only the poet's sense of identity as a conflictual dialogue of cultures but also his knowledge that community and self are continuously reformed through the struggle.

NOTES

1. To be fair to Bakhtin, this sense of dialogue is available at the edges of his discourse. Michael Holquist, in his glossary notes to Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination*, suggests that "[a] word, discourse, language or culture undergoes 'dialogization' when it becomes relativized, de-privileged, aware of competing definitions for the same things" (427). Perhaps, then, in the postmodern view of ethnicity, heteroglossia becomes the expression of ethnicity; that is, ethnicity is always given meaning as context and in contrast rather than as a set criteria of traditions or ceremonies. The literature therefore reinforces this sense of heteroglossia on two levels, both as the language forms meanings from multiple sources of intention and as the cultures written of interact.

2. In Rafael Pérez-Torres's recent study, *Movements in Chicano Poetry: Against Myths, against Margins*, the discussion of Aztlán in the poetry of Jimmy Santiago Baca can be seen to both complement and diverge from the present work. I have tried, in my introduction here of Pérez-Torres's ideas on postcolonialism, to suggest key elements in that difference.

3. Michael M. J. Fischer seems to support a similar notion of identity in his recent article, "Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory." Fischer suggests any look at ethnicity today must be tied to a postmodern understanding of the fragmentary and even unformed nature of late twentieth-century identity. He points out that the place where this becomes most evident is in the growing area of ethnic autobiography, where many books today cannot easily be classified in terms of what he calls the "traditional sociological literature on ethnicity" (195). This idea that a postmodern understanding must accompany our reading of today's ethnic literatures does not seem unusual if we consider the fact that literature is always cultural expression and therefore somehow influenced by the cultural interactions that signify the age in which it is produced. Perhaps this is even more true today, when cultural exclusivity seems far less feasible, and also less desirable, in the complex maneuverings of an increasingly international understanding of cultural exchange.

4. This need to establish a homeland, found in much of the poetry of the period, coincides with popular documentation within that movement, such as the seminal work produced at the 1969 Denver "National Chicano Youth Liberation Conference," called *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*, which, in the context of this appropriation of a regional and indigenous identity, outlines the needs and demands for social and political change, as well as a call for self-determination and even self-defense (Pina 39).

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