

Everything's Good In The Late Summer Rains: An Interview With Jimmy Santiago Baca

By Luna Olavarría Gallegos

Every summer, the acclaimed New Mexican poet Jimmy Santiago Baca hosts a writing workshop in his hometown of Albuquerque. The eclectic crowd, which consists of hesitant middle-aged writers, formerly incarcerated poets, college professors, and a smattering of local rappers and high school students, represents a cross-section of his life and occupies a position completely opposite to the typical sun-hatted, Georgia O'Keeffe-esque Santa Fe writer's scene. It makes sense — Santiago Baca, orphaned at a young age, survived as a teen on the streets, until he was incarcerated in the notorious and brutal Arizona State Prison. He taught himself to read, writing poems for other inmates in exchange for cigarettes, until he was discovered by Denise Levertov, an editor at Mother Jones.

Santiago Baca's work channels darkness and redemption in a way that even goes beyond canonical New Mexican novelists like Rudolfo Anaya and Tony Hillerman. A respect of labor and trade echoes throughout his poetry and essays. It's writing in the real world, as opposed to being separate from it, where pipe-fittings and weldings are more beautiful than unpeopled landscapes. While he has become one of the most important writers that the Southwest has ever produced, he has never accepted the tethers of the literary establishment.

Throughout this year's workshop, held at the Albuquerque Museum, Santiago Baca would call up people to read, offering humor and insights that draw attention to his philosophy. In one instance, a six-foot-tall bearded white man in flannel took the stage. "Look at him," he said to the crowd, in his spontaneous and informal way, playing the role of emcee. "If you passed him on I-40, you would never imagine he's full of poetry. You'd look at him and think he was full of meth. But listen to him."

Santiago Baca, now 71, has published over thirty books. His 1987 poetry collection *Martin & Meditations on the South Valley* received an American Book Award. His 1993 screenplay *Bound By Honor* was produced by Hollywood as the cult classic *Blood In, Blood Out*. All of his writing is filled with the same precision and emotion he asks of his workshop participants. *Write until you cry*—one student recounted him telling her—and then write some more.

This interview, conducted in September 2022 was originally broadcast on KUNM on 89.9FM. It has been edited and condensed for publication.

LUNA OLAVARRIA GALLEGOS: Although I was born and raised in Albuquerque, I first encountered your work in New York City as an adult, at a play by Ishmael Reed at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe. He had a line: 'the great New Mexican poet, Jimmy Santiago Baca', which prompted me to look you up afterwards. I was shocked at how much you'd published and how little I had heard about it. Do you feel at all like this is a metaphor for how your work has taken up more outside of New Mexico than within New Mexico?

JIMMY SANTIAGO BACA: I don't know who reads my books here in New Mexico. I mean, I get a lot of emails. I'm always surprised because I try to shy away from TV, and I don't go on NPR or PBS. I agreed to his interview because you're from here and because you mentioned my good friend Ishmael Reed. He's a really good buddy of mine. I love him. I think he's one of the great thinkers of our time.

When it comes to illiteracy, New Mexico is at the bottom of the list. So [teachers] go along with the school board selections of books, and unfortunately, those books are selected on their power to *tame* students, not free their minds. You'll hear of teachers, every now and then, that will go out of the parameters of what's considered acceptable and go ahead and order my books. Somebody's doing something out there. It could be in New Mexico. I don't think I'm acceptable to school boards. I think they're petrified of me.

But I think students and people like you that go outside and actually try to explore their place in the world run into my name. I think people like you often end up with my books at your bedside table saying, how come I haven't read him before? I do know that I get a lot of letters from people like you, emails from people like you saying, we read a poem of yours.

I'm a little radical. I'm a little political. I'm not one of these poet laureate types. I'm not one of these guys who go out into the forest and talk about the beautiful deer in the forest while the forest is burning down from climate change. I'm not one of those kinds of poets. I would rather talk about climate change than the deer that's inherent in climate change. I don't write about how sad I am because no one loves me. I write about how fucking crazy love is. You gotta be crazy to love me. It's one of those things.

Olavarría Gallegos: What do you think the state of poetry is today, especially with the poets that are being recognized?

Santiago Baca: The last several poet laureates, when they got their distinction as poet laureates nationally, they called to ask if I would interview them. Even Amanda Gorman, after she read for Biden, all her agents and everybody in the world called me, can you please interview her? Can you interview her? And I said, sure. So it was just a young Black girl. And I was like, we're going to support you. We're going to give everything we have for you. And then a week later, everybody in the country read her work and says she's not a poet.

But you know what? Ninety-percent of all the people who teach poetry are not poets. And eighty-five percent of all poet laureates are not poets. Every poet that I hear, they're not poets. It's a political thing. An administrative job. You have to be an administrator, not a poet, to be poet laureate. You have to be able to guarantee on a contract that you're not going to upset anyone. Talk about how vapid and vacuous and void of any sort of real thinking our culture is right now in literature. Don't think about that stuff. And don't talk about white guys running the literary departments, and don't talk about all these white people running the publishing company. Just don't.

Olavarría Gallegos: When I mentioned Ishmael Reed earlier you called him one of the great thinkers of our time. Do you mind sharing a little bit about your relationship with him?

Santiago Baca: Well, Ishmael and I know a lot of the same people. I was part of that group of poets that started the Nuyorican Cafe. I was actually there sitting on the steps of the building before they owned it, talking about it with them. There's a really heavy connection between the Nuyoricans and the Chicano people. It's almost like an underground railroad in a literary sense. We all ran in the same circles.

Ishmael told me, "I like the way that you refuse to let education make you hate yourself or your people." That was because I keynoted the National Council of Teachers of English. And I was like, yeah, you got it. I'm not going to walk into an institution that tells me my grandfather was lazy. The man died of cancer working in the fields all his life. My grandmother went blind working in the pesticide fields. I was at an Indian school for

boarding. I saw them all raped. I'm not going to say these people can teach me anything before they learn how to be human beings again. And that's just like — you don't have to be radical or political or anything. That's just human. I know that my grandfather was one of the kindest people in the world, and nothing's going to change my mind about that. I don't care if you bring all those scientists from Los Alamos who are making all those bombs with plutonium pits. You're not going to change the fact that my grandfather was the most gentlest man in the world.

Olavarría Gallegos: You said other poets in New York understood you. Were the publishers there open to your stuff?

Santiago Baca: I used to live in New York, and I used to hang out with all the writers and the poets there. I didn't really know where in what context I stood. I didn't know.

Look, I was publishing with New Directions. Then from there, I went to Grove. So great, I broke that glass ceiling. I didn't know where to put myself. I don't know where to put myself today. I just write because I love writing. And if you're an academic and you belong to an institution, then more likely than not, you're afraid of me. It's just really weird how foundations, people who are at like, Library of Congress, all those people, I can be at dinner with them, and they're terrified of speaking with me, and the only thing I've ever done is read poetry.

So I know poetry. And you would think that that would be common ground for us, but they seem to think that I know where all the holes in the boat are, and I could easily unplug one of them and the boat would sink. But I'm not that kind of a person, nor am I the kind of person that would say, I will accept a grant from you *and* do what you wish. I can't do that. I've been invited by Oprah. I've been invited to go to Marfa, Texas, by the Lannan Foundation. I'm like, I can't do that. I mean, if you're going to invite anybody, go interview all these young Chicano kids who are learning to read and write in jail on their way to doing fifty years in prison. Go interview them. Ninety-five percent of them are not even guilty. Go interview them. Don't waste your time on somebody like me. I don't need it. I don't want it.

So I begin to wonder why they would demonize such wonderful people. Why would they demonize the culture here? Why would they try to destroy the dreams of people, when dreams are the most powerful thing our people have? Why do they go after the dream? Why can't young Latinas, young Chicanas especially, why can't they dream of being really powerful great poets, and why do they have to try to destroy it in institutions that are so called places of learning? My kids ask “Papi, how did you put us all through college as a poet?” And I just tell them, because I'm bad-ass. You can be a badass when you love yourself.

But there's things that I had to learn the hard way. I was a major drug addict. Alcoholism, violence. I had such rage. I wanted to fight everybody that hadn't done time. I even wanted to fight everybody who did time. There were so many shifts I had to make. So many solitary hours, so much sorrow, so much crying, so much hurt, so much pain that at the end of the day, I got there. And it was the process of writing and the process of reading and the process of being vulnerable and being sincere and being truthful, and not the machinations of trying to achieve a position in the government or trying to win a grant or none of that. That didn't make me a good person. What made me a good person was to come home and see my daughter's eyes and have her know that I'm not high and I'm not drunk and I'm about to go in there and read a book.

Olavarría Gallegos: Gary Soto [*Author's Note: Mexican American poet and novelist*] said about you, "Jimmy's never been a careerist like so many other poets, with one eye on the publishing world and one eye on his subject. Jimmy has both eyes on his subject." For you, where does good writing come from?

Santiago Baca: Good writing comes from you living the kind of life where what you see, what you feel, through your senses, eventually percolates to the top, and then you're able to write about it. There's a lot of things that go on in the human body, in the mind. Even if you don't think you're processing it all, you are. And if you stay true to your craft, it all manifests in the poem. It's the process, not the result, that makes that happen. So the process I have is not to fill my time with everything that will keep me unlonely. The process I have is okay to be lonely, it's okay. And the process I have is a spiritual order that I follow, you know.

Gary Soto to me is an amazing poet. You see, that's another thing that bothers me is that everybody thinks they got to where they got without the help of their ancestors, in this I mean legacy and poetry. I mean, the Gary Sotos of the world actually opened up a lot of doors for Latinx people writing today. I don't like the word Latinx, I don't ever use it, but if I can encompass everybody in that corral like a bunch of hens or turkeys, I would say that Gary Soto opened an awful lot of doors to those people.

He sat in those offices and negotiated with those companies and he got a lot of good money and thank God for that. All of these people who struggle so hard to open the doors. Now you have this flood of Latinos coming in and act as if they got there on their own accord. They didn't. There was a whole army of young Latinas and Latinos that went there and they suffered and they fought and they got it done.

Gary, Victor Cruz, Ricardo Sánchez, I could go on and on and on and on of people who suffered a lot to write the work that they wrote so that they could open the doors for the rest of the people following now. I understand that Junot Díaz and Sherman Alexie helped a lot of young writers. They helped a lot of them and then the next thing you know, they're being accused of being predators. And I was shocked. I looked at the other writers around, those two, — really good writers — and I saw that they were afraid to support these two people. And I was like, wow, why would they be afraid to support them?

Olavarría Gallegos: So you feel like Latino and Native American writers turned their backs on Díaz and Alexie in a difficult time?

Santiago Baca: I mean, I openly saw the emails that said, "I'm taking everything off my Facebook right now, so it doesn't have any support." And I'm like, how could they attack these two people so viciously? I mean, if they were guilty — I don't know if they were guilty or not — but if they were, then there should be a forum in which we can all come together and talk about something in a way that moves us forward, not crucify each other.

So I'm looking at all of this as an outsider's perspective of these two megapillars who helped define the direction of our literature and how they were attacked and destroyed. And I felt really sad. I felt a wound opening up and a trauma being relived again. And it seemed to be pushed by white people. All these white academics pushing the Latina academics to say something, to stand up, to attack them and let yourself be known, let your face go out there, get some fame out of this, be famous for attacking these people.

Whatever happened to saying, okay, we forgive you? Why was it so viciously attacked to a point where it destroyed their writing? They don't write anymore. I've not seen anything from them. And I like their writing.

When you censor a writer for personal misbehaviors and you equate the personal misbehaviors with the writing and shut down writing, that's not a good thing. It's a terrible thing to have that kind of censorship imposed upon you by your own so-called people.

Olavarría Gallegos: You're talking about the co-opting of real feminist struggles by the elitist institution.

Santiago Baca: Self immolation.

Olavarría Gallegos: Self immolation. Self censorship.

Santiago Baca: In New York, there's this huge wave of young editors and publishers who are picking poets who are tame. Who are picking poets who talk about "this is how you made me feel last night", instead of the *whoosh*, and you can interpret the as you *whoosh* how you want. But Steinbeck wrote about the Great Migration, there was Faulkner, and *Huckleberry Finn*. When you no longer take on subjects that are really deep and meaningful to the country, when you have editors that are opting for evasion and avoidance, then what good is that literature?

Coffee House Press just dropped Victor Cruz Hernandez and they published, I think, three or four of his books, but they dropped him because he wasn't politically akin to LGBTQ. I don't know what that is, but I know when you drop a person not based on their work, then you're totally screwing up literature for the people who are reading it. We want a broad range. So now Ishmael Reed is going to publish this book. Thank God for him.

With the grace of God, I swear I walk in rooms where I know poets. I've known them for fifty years, and I look at them and you can see what compromise has done to them. You can see it. You can see it in their work. You can see it in their face. And then you take an Irish poet, and it's a difference in night and day. They walk in, their spirits ebullient, and they're bursting with creativity and they want to dance with the stars. And then our poets who have compromised themselves all the way through National Book Awards of America, whatever, they sit in the corner biting their fingernails. I'm like, what the hell happened to you? I used to know you when you were young. Now they're still writing about deers while the forest is burning.

Olavarría Gallegos: For me, some of the most compelling and beautiful aspects of your work are your spot on depictions of Albuquerque and also, more broadly, New Mexico, but specifically Albuquerque. Barelás. The South Valley Tingley. The Rio Grande. I'd love for you to just talk about how Albuquerque has changed since your childhood.

Santiago Baca: There's so many changes in so many ways, in so many areas and so many contexts. I think the Internet drove the changes in the city. And because we're so uneducated, we take this hyper reality that Instagram is, we take it for reality and we react to it. And all the violence and the shooting and the guns — it sort of gives you this unspoken agreement and permission that if you carry a gun and use it, it's going to give you a place in the world of importance. And so consequently, you have prisons filling up with 18 and 19 year old kids who committed atrocious crimes. And that all goes back to education, not being able to reason properly and to the need for people to get out of despair.

So has Albuquerque changed? I think it's grown deeply more despairing. I think it's grown seriously more dangerous. I think it hasn't taken away from the beauty of the people. There are people in the South Valley, man. Actually, there's people all over the city that are so beautiful and they just keep going. And this is not

along race lines. And we're being assaulted from both sides. Once by the politicians, who for the most part, are just useless and corrupt, and on the other side by gangsters who want to make a name for themselves in the drug trade. I have five children. All of them have gone on to make great lives for themselves. My one daughter's in University of Miami right now. My other daughter, Lucia, is just like... forget it. She's taking names, boy, I'm telling you. But every single one of my kids has told me over and over, "Papi, the school sucks. The school is no good."

And yet even Lucia, as much as I try to shelter her, as much as we try to give her an environment where she can really bloom — she went to a party a month ago, and one of her friends was killed by some idiot who just thought it's going to be fun to go by and take an AR 15 and start shooting. And it wasn't blowing up in the news or anything, but it traumatized her. They were all just having fun and dancing. These kids are super gentle but yet when this guy came by in a car and wounded six and killed one.

Again, my answer to all of that is books. I have a lot of programs where I work with prisoners around the world, most specifically in the United States, and I visit prisons quite a bit. It's an interesting meeting when literature meets experience. Say there's a kid who's never read a book, and he's got to do twenty five or fifty years and he happens to come to one of my writing workshops in prison, and I hand him a book. Then he comes back to me the next week and says, I didn't know you could do that. I didn't know you could write like that. I didn't know you could put that in there. He says, I've been carrying this shame all my life. I didn't know you could write about that stuff. And I'm like, yeah, you can. So books, to me, seem to be the answer for a lot of things.

Olavarría Gallegos: You've written a lot about Palestine, as well as the discrimination against writers and other intellectuals when they're vocal against Israeli occupation of Palestine.

Santiago Baca: Look, you don't have to be political to know that when there's kids in the street with stones in their hands fighting against people with tanks and jets, you don't have to figure it out. I got invited by the Israeli government to go read there, and I turned them down in seconds, even though the amount of money they were offering could have bought me five Teslas. I said, I don't need it. I'm pro-Palestinian. Within twenty-four hours, a famous Native American poet stepped up and said, I'll go. And once you went, then you came back, and they'd opened a lot of doors from Jewish organizations. She went on to get this, that, this, that. Nothing happened to me. I just had a harder time paying my bills. But that's okay, right? I don't mind that.

Olavarría Gallegos: And yet even while keeping your principles many institutions have embraced your work.

Santiago Baca: The interesting thing about being a writer is that there's many things that are controversial and conflicted. On one end, there's a lot of beauty on the other. I mean, there's so much beauty on the other end. For instance, who would ever guess that Stanford would take all my archives? I'm like what? Are you kidding me? Like, when I was in prison, I used to stand by a bunk and listen to a guy read Hemingway. You're going to take all my archives and they're going to sit next to Hemingway's at Stanford? Do you dig the beautiful contradiction there that in prison I'm hearing this guy read his book, and I'm learning how to read and write.

And those are the beautiful things that happen. For instance, when I was in prison, I was a porter in the administrative lockup, where guys were acting up. I didn't act up. I just didn't want to work. I told the prison administration, I'm never going to work. So that's just the way it is. No matter what you do, I'm not going to work for you. You can beat me up a thousand times. I'm not dead. You're going to have to kill me. So I was a

porter, and I got to go around to the other side where death row was, and I would ask them for books because I had no money. I got no parents, got no family. And they were a more serious mind because all of a sudden, mortality was facing them. And one of the things I was curious about was they read Mark Twain, and I was like, you're about to die, and the book you carry into death is Huckleberry Finn? So right then and there I decided if I ever write a book, it's going to be about somebody along the Rio Grande. And I've written two for New Directions.

So fast forward forty years. Whoever thought that I would be keynoting the international conference on Mark Twain? And so you just have to be strong. You have to just surround yourself with people who love you and then just get on with the day. And you always get in trouble when someone offers you power. I have always backed away from it because I felt that anything I had to say could be said through my work and my writing, not through holding some literary office and being this powerful person.

Olavarría Gallegos: What do you think about the state of writing in New Mexico now? And if you could wish something for the infrastructure for writing in New Mexico and Albuquerque, what would it be?

Santiago Baca: Get rid of all the public school administrators. Get rid of all of them. Go over here to Louisiana and San Pedro in that little Albuquerque public school area and just empty out their offices all the way at the top. No more stealing our money. No more vacations where you take the money that you should have been spending on textbooks. Get out. Everybody go and start putting some serious people in them that can start to really educate our kids.

So what do I think of it? I think we have a horrible, horrible, horrible state of education in New Mexico, and nobody cares because everybody seems to be on this nepotism ferris wheel. You get on and you get your money and you don't say nothing. And yet you have all of these kids who can't even read and write. You know that when I talk about literacy, I'm not so much speaking about the grammar. I'm speaking about the inability of kids to tell you what they're feeling. That to me, is more important than grammar. Emotional literacy is more important to me than grammar when a child can't even tell you what he's feeling. And that's what's happening now.

As sad as that picture is that I paint, I've seen incidents quite frequently where mothers have taken their children to the libraries and created their own curriculum, they created their own lesson plan. So I guess my answer to your question would be, whereas all the schools have failed, then you have this whole charter school thing where it's mostly just rich white parents that want their kids. So what you have, you have libraries becoming the epicenters of education, and parents load up kids in their cars and take them there, and that's where they're getting their education. So if it were me, I would probably go and handpick all these librarians and make them all administrators because they know how education works.

And you know what's funny? The contradiction is this. Look, yeah, we're high in illiteracy, but that doesn't mean that people don't want to learn to read and write. It doesn't mean that they don't love to. It just means that we're not getting them the books or the environment in which to thrive. That's all that means. Don't get me wrong, there are really good teachers, but they're far outnumbered by the bad ones.

Olavarría Gallegos: Is there anything else that you'd like to add?

Santiago Baca: No, not really. Everything's good in the late summer rains, and I'm expecting to have a beautiful fall.