

Jimmy Santiago Bacas so Mexicans are taking jobs from Americans

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Tactics of Poetic Resistance in Jimmy Santiago Baca's "So Mexicans are taking Jobs from Americans." The poem "So Mexicans are taking Jobs from Americans" by Jimmy Santiago Baca was written in the 1970s, at a time when Baca was imprisoned for drugs offences. In those days, as indeed in present day America, there were tensions between poor Mexicans immigrating into the United States looking for work, and white working class Americans who were competing for the same low level jobs. Baca's poem describes the white Americans' widespread feelings of resentment because they thought were being displaced by these incomers but it does so in such a way that the reader can tell how his sympathies lie more with the Mexican incomers than with the American population. Baca's poem resists prevailing assumptions about the Mexican immigrants by using three literary tactics: overstatement, analogy and irony. Baca has a mixed Indio-Mexican descent and experienced an impoverished childhood without the benefits of a loving mother and a decent education. (Baca website, 2011) He was brought up by his grandmother, and came into contact with drugs and crime, resulting in long imprisonment. He learned to read and write in prison and eventually became a successful author of poetry, novels and films. This background means that knows what he is talking about when he mentions "starving children" because he was one of those children. The structure of the poem is based around an imaginary conversation. The title, for example, starts with the word "So", suggesting that it is part of a longer debate that has been going on before the moment of writing or reading the poem. This links the poem into the real world where people talk about the political issue of immigration. The first line responds to the suggestion that Mexicans take

jobs from Americans with an immediate challenging question : “ Oh Yes?” (line 1) The tone of the poem is at first chatty, as if two people are debating the points between them. The response to the opening title is made in the form of a challenging question, depicting an imaginary scenario which sounds like a highway robbery. (lines 1-5) In effect the scenario redefines what the title contains, making the underlying assumptions clear through a narrative example. A second imagined scenario is suggested next, involving still more violence, where Mexicans demand jobs from Americans at knifepoint. (lines 7-11) These are overstatements of the way that Mexicans behave, and they exaggerate things to the point that the reader realises that the implied answer to the questions is actually “ No, Mexicans do not behave like this”, and that the scenarios have been exaggerated deliberately to show how false they are. Another tactic that Baca uses is analogy, using one concept to express another. An elderly white politician is described unflatteringly as “ turtle heavy” (line 12) whose tongue “ paddles through flashing waves of lightbulbs, of cameramen, rasping...” (lines 15-16). The vivid image of his wrinkled face, and his physical weakness is likened to a turtle out of water. The analogy shows that although he is a powerful politician, in reality he is weak and out of his element. Later in the poem he contrast the luxurious “ cool green sea of money” which signifies the wealth of white America with the “ search for pearls in the darkest depths” which signifies the struggles of a Mexican immigrant underclass who have to overcome so many barriers in order to find just a little money. The third tactic that the poem uses is irony. This, at is most simple, is defined as “ saying what is contrary to what is meant” (Colebrook: 2004, p. 1) The title of

the poem is deeply ironic. It is a statement, and one which at first sight looks logical, reasonable, and correct. It does appear that Mexicans are taking jobs from Americans. By the time the reader has worked his or her way through all the overstatements and analogies in the poem that follows, however, the real meaning becomes clear: "... millions of people fight to live ... trying to cross poverty, to just having something." (lines 34-37) In conclusion, then, Baca's imaginative use of these three tactics of overstatement, analogy and irony results in a vivid poem which conjures up an extreme version of the tensions between Mexicans and Americans. The end result is to underline how ridiculous and harmful such widespread prejudice is, and to encourage people instead to think of barriers like poverty, hate and exclusion, rather than the too-simple barriers of race and citizenship. References Baca, Jimmy Santiago. " So Mexicans are taking Jobs from Americans" in Mazziotti and Gillan (eds), *Unsettling America: An Anthology of Contemporary Multicultural Poetry*. New York: Penguin, 1994, pp. 115-116. Poem. Baca, Jimmy Santiago. Author's website. Available at: <http://www.jimmysantiagobaca.com/biography.html> Accessed on 28th February 2011. Colebrook, Claire. *Irony. The New Critical Idiom*. New York: Routledge, 2004.