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American Literary Connections in Jimmy Santiago Baca's *American Orphan*

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Abstract

Jimmy Santiago Baca's recent novel *American Orphan*, published in 2021, is analyzed both as a life narrative and the latest addition to the long tradition of the American classics. The theoretical framework addresses the distinction between an autobiography and a life narrative (the latter being a broader term which includes various types of self-referential narratives according to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson) and the issue of (non)-fictionality in this genre. Baca's narrative is analyzed in relation to its treatment of the themes of silence, trauma, minority group experience, and acquiring one's individual voice. Furthermore, Baca's narrative owes its powerful expression to the American literary tradition as it draws upon some of the literary tropes established by earlier American texts. An attempt is made to establish a link between the American values of survival, individual achievement and optimism expressed in American literature and Baca's life writing.

Keywords: Jimmy Santiago Baca, Life Narrative, Autobiography, Chicano Literature, Trauma

Jimmy Santiago Baca'nın *American Orphan* Adlı Eserinde Amerikan Edebiyatı Bağlantıları

Öz

Bu çalışmada Jimmy Santiago Baca'nın 2021 yılında yayınlanan son romanı, *American Orphan*, hem bir yaşam anlatısı hem de uzun bir geçmişi olan Amerikan eserlerine katılmış bir metin olarak ele alınır. Seçilen kuramsal çerçeve, otobiyografi ve (Sidonie Smith ve Julia Watson'ın tanımına göre kendi kendine atıfta bulunan birçok anlatı türünün dahil edildiği geniş kapsamlı bir tür olan) yaşam yazını arasındaki ayrıma ve yaşam yazınının olgu yönelimli yapısına dikkat çeker. Baca'nın yaşam anlatısı, sessizlik, travma, azınlık grupların tecrübeleri ve bireyin kendi sesini kazanması temalarını ele alışıyla ilişkili olarak analiz edilir. Buna ek olarak, Amerikan eserlerinde görülen bazı edebi motifleri de kullanan bu anlatı, güçlü ifadesini Amerikan edebi geleneğine borçludur. Makale, Amerikan edebiyatında görülen hayatta kalma, bireysel başarı ve iyimserlik gibi Amerikan değerleriyle Baca'nın yaşam anlatısı arasında bir bağ kurmaya çalışır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Jimmy Santiago Baca, Yaşam Yazını, Otobiyografi, Chicano Edebiyatı, Travma

Introduction

The American tradition of life writings could be said to have begun in 1492 with Columbus' diaries and travel logs. From the early period of colonization, travelers and colonizers provided various reports of their daily lives and adventures with a twofold purpose: on the one hand, they were required to scan the new continent and put it into the service of the Western European imperial goals. On the other hand, narratives of their daily lives were also a way to imaginatively deal with a new land and make a symbolic conquest of their new situation. In time, life narratives have changed along with the social, historical and cultural contexts, but the inherent human need to tell a story of

their own experiences and make it a piece of a puzzle of the collective human experience has remained.

Some critics believe that the genre of autobiography, with its emphasis on the independent self and one's individual and individualistic experience, is inherently connected to the American experience although the form itself did not originate in America (Bollinger 102). During the colonial period, the first genuinely American genre, captivity narratives, emerged. The accounts of individual survivors who were kidnapped by Native Americans and lived to tell the tale were some of the most popular colonial texts, as were the slave narratives in the antebellum period of American history. The stories of individuals who managed to survive troubles and plights of captivity and slavery were also a way for the oppressed to acquire their own voice and imaginatively deal with the traumatic experience they had to endure. On the other hand, the iconic life narratives, such as Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, represent not only highly valued works of art but also the celebration of individual achievement, like the famous motto of the American Dream: from rags to riches. Some critics place the history of American autobiographical writing between "dominant and marginal texts" (Eakin 10). It could also be said that autobiographic writing in American tradition has often been a safe haven for those belonging to racial, gender and social minority groups, as a means of making the voices of those silenced and overlooked in official history books heard and remembered. Such is the case with Jimmy Baca's *American Orphan* that is an account by an underprivileged minority member, victimized by his social status, his Chicano origin, his position as an orphan and a former prisoner and by the brutal violence he suffered during his childhood and his youth. Baca's life narrative is a story of survival and represents an individual achievement as well as a minority voice speaking for the many. What is more, its roots can be traced back to the famous American writers and their stories of success and individual achievement.

Life Narratives and Autobiography in the American Context

Before exploring Baca's novel, it is first necessary to discuss the aspects that make the work a life narrative and an example of

autobiographical writing. The two terms are often used interchangeably although Smith and Watson (3) propose that a life narrative is a broader term encompassing autobiographical writing among other types of self-referential narratives, which contain the subject's life as its central theme. According to these authors, the key characteristic—which makes any text a life narrative—is a match between the real life details of the author and the key events in the literary "life" of the protagonist (Smith and Watson 8). However, it is also important to mention the most recent critical considerations of life writings, which tend to make a distinction "between the authorial and textual self" (Bollinger 102). In other words, any criticism of life narratives must start from the premise that the view of the author/narrator the self-referential texts offer is not only based on factual truth but also nuanced and modified by a personal perspective and style. A life narrative, thus, presents a dual view of the author═from within and from without (Smith and Watson 5). This duality can often be observed in autobiographical texts when analyzing the narrator(s)—usually there is more than one narrative voice, the present-moment self and the self in the past.

This distinction necessarily raises the question of (non-) fictionality, i.e., the notions of truthfulness, adhering to facts and the literary conventions of imaginative writing. A justification for classifying Baca's autobiographical novel as a life narrative can be found in Gudmundsdóttir's work. He says, "I consider here fictionality to be a necessary part of the autobiographical process itself and not something external to it, or incompatible with it." (4). According to this author, any autobiographical narrative will necessarily contain some fictional elements, whether those inherent in the writing process itself (such as using the conventions of fictional writing to describe and express actual experiences), or those pertaining to memory itself and its selective qualities. When discussing any form of self-referential writing, one has to take into account the fact that such writing is based on someone's individual and subjective memories and that the way in which these memories are arranged and presented to the readers has to do with the author's individual talent and preference and, sometimes, a deliberate blurring of the boundaries between faction and fiction. In other words, "The past in autobiography is always to some extent an imaginary past, and this is even more prominent when autobiographers are writing on a past in a different country, a different culture" (Gudmundsdóttir 9). On a similar note, Smith and Watson claim that

autobiographical narration is selective and intentional and a personal storytelling process rests on a mutual "agreement" between the narrator and the reader that everything written need not and "cannot be read solely as either factual truth or simple facts" (13-14). As for Baca's novel and his broader oeuvre, there is a definite streak of truthfulness present, a combination of autobiographical details and some unverified and unverifiable details. It is known from his biography that he spent his childhood and youth in an orphanage and later in prison as indicated in the text; so, in that sense, his account can be considered an autobiographical life narrative.

A link between Baca's life writing and the role and importance of autobiography in American literature lies in the fact that he, and consequently, his protagonist(s), belong to the Mexican American minority. In other words, Baca's narrator writes from the oppressed position of a minority group. As the act of writing about oneself is also an act of self-creation, self-reinvention and self-assertion, it is particularly relevant for the minority writers. These writers, whose works are rooted in the tradition of protest, are known for breaking through the barriers of gender, color and social status and making themselves visible to the broader public (Sayre 29). This democratic and inclusive aspect of life writing has often been emphasized by the critics. Sayre for example, even goes as far as saying that life writings "offer the student in American Studies a broader and more direct contact with American experience than any other kind of writing" (11). In the American tradition of autobiographical writing, the idea of an individual experience representing a group experience is often emphasized. Although autobiography is a form of personal history, it is not only a private history, for the personal narrative is always grounded in some historical and social circumstances as an individual is always a product of a group as well as private experience (Stone 3). In contemporary autobiographies, the focus is often on the position of the subject, ethnic minority experience, the issues of representation and the individual relationship with the past, rather than on the exact details of one's life (Gudmundsdóttir 1). Baca's life narrative can be said to incorporate all those aspects and could be interpreted as both a private story and a story of collective (Mexican American) experience.

Finally, the importance of autobiographical writing lies in the fact that it represents the acts of self-empowerment and finding one's own voice, a necessary step in any journey of self-discovery, or,

as Robert Sayre puts it: "In an age of threatening depersonalization, when, paradoxically, everyone wants to find his/her 'identity,' the autobiographer is a hero . . . or another one of the antiheroes" (30). As will be demonstrated further, Jimmy Santiago Baca and his literary counterpart are heroes who champion the entire underprivileged group of Chicanos. What is more, Baca's heroes follow in the footsteps of other important American literary heroes from the life narrative genre.

Jimmy Baca's *American Orphan*

Jimmy Santiago Baca (1952 –) is among the key Chicano poets, writers and memoirists. Born in Santa Fe, New Mexico, of Mexican and Apache descent, he spent much of his childhood in an orphanage and much of his youth in prison for drug possession. Self-taught in prison, he managed to publish his first poetry collection in 1979. Since then, his renowned poetry collections earned him the prestigious Wallace Stevens Poetry Award. He has taught poetry and Chicana/o Studies at universities and remains socially engaged in the programs for rehabilitation of prisoners. His recent book *American Orphan* (2021) is another one of his "highly autobiographical" works (Kanellos 78), dealing with his childhood memories and the traumas he and his brother endured. Baca starts his narrative with a dedication which clearly states his purpose: he writes to honor his educators and the people who helped him on his journey to become a writer, to speak for the multitudes of Chicano children victimized by the system and in the memory of his brother "who died an addict in an alley because he could not endure the trauma of being abused by priests" (6). The twofold function of his narrative is established from the beginning: the author uses his personal experiences as well as those of his beloved ones to deal with the individual trauma but also to be the voice of an entire minority group, those who were victimized, oppressed and silenced. Throughout the novel, the reader follows the journey of Orlando Lucero, also known as Ghost Boy, who is released from prison at the age of twenty-two after spending his childhood in an orphanage and the previous seven years in the youth correctional facility (DYA – Denver Youth Authority) for smuggling marijuana. The protagonist's life path and the dates indicated in the book correspond to the author's life details. Orlando first goes to visit his elder brother Camilo, only to discover that his brother is an addict and a criminal, who will not

help his resolve to straighten his life. He then spends time with Lila, a woman who was his prison pen pal and who offers her home, her financial support, and her love until Orlando is able to make his living. During his efforts to accomplish a successful and non-criminal reentry into the society, the narrator constantly goes back and forth between his present self, a successful writer with a lovely family and a nice home (just like the author himself), and his past self, a freshly released prisoner with a traumatic past. After many attempts, mistakes and some illegal smuggling activities, Orlando is finally able to move on; with the help of two women, he manages to publish his first poetry collection and give his formal testimony of sexual abuse by the priests in his orphanage.

The themes of silence and, indirectly, finding one's voice are implied by the nickname of the protagonist. The narrator explains that he got the nickname Ghost Boy because he did not speak for the first couple of years of his imprisonment. He built an alternate identity as a coping mechanism for dealing with trauma: that way, everything bad that happened, happened to Ghost Boy, not himself. The crucial moment of self-realization happens towards the end of the book when the narrator rejects the Ghost Boy identity and manages to speak about the sexual abuse he suffered at the Catholic orphanage. Symbolically, this is the moment when Ghost Boy leaves, and Orlando, Baca's fictional double, begins his literary journey. In many ways, Baca's narrative is a struggle to find one's individual voice as well as to voice the collective experiences of a group. Just like in the American classics, *Walden* and *Song of Myself*, the individual identity is synthetized from the multitudes of experiences, and the moment of announcing one's identity coincides with inner reflection (Bollinger 103).

The theme of silence and silencing is connected to a group experience as well. At one point, Baca's narrator answers a white man's question with a nod and observes: "Mexicans are not expected to talk" as they are perceived as "beasts of burden, not human enough to have the capacity to think and speak" (99). The systemic racism, the ever-present discrimination and the abuse and abandonment Orlando suffered within his own community teach him to hide his suffering behind silence and a false 'macho' identity. He even considers writing to be a dangerous activity: "It's 'cuz when I write, sometimes I get this feeling I'm cracking up. I don't trust no doctor or shrink messing around with me. I seen what they do to kids they diagnose as sick, They

end up zombies." (99) It takes time and a lot of effort and help from two women in his life to overcome his fears and find his voice. The trauma and the impulse for silence are so strong in Orlando that he needs Lila to tell him: "Your voice. Yes, you have it, Orlando. Use it" (152), and "You have every right to be traumatized. *Every* right. Bastards." (135). Lila becomes the empowering agent who helps Orlando acknowledge his true feelings and fears and admit to himself and to the world the truth about the abuse. Having survived rape, Lila feels the empathy, which Orlando desperately needs. Another female character, Denise, helps him publish his first book of poetry making his voice heard and his experiences known to the world. Thus, female characters in the literary roles of coaxers or coercers (Smith and Watson 50) help Orlando acquire his voice, both within the narrative and beyond because publishing his work proves to be a crucial moment in Orlando's (but also Baca's) literary career and a turning point in his life.

The truth about the sexual abuse Baca's protagonist suffered in the orphanage is revealed in an oblique manner. The narrator touches upon the theme of abuse several times in the narrative without ever being explicit about the particulars. It is understandable that Orlando is unable to talk about it because of trauma, for the words are not enough to express the horrors he went through. The author resorts to a similar strategy Melville used in "Benito Cereno": a part of the story is told through official documents, not by the narrator. Orlando receives documents in the lawsuit against the diocese of the Catholic Church who owned the orphanage where the abuse happened, and he is asked for a written testimony. He refuses to write the testimony but tells everything to Lila, who fills in the document and sends it to the court. The verbatim documents constitute a part of the narrative with a clear difference in style, tone and language functionality. This is a technique usually employed by biographers (Smith and Watson 6), but Baca uses it in a life narrative in a particularly effective manner. Orlando's abuse is revealed in a document written in legal jargon. The manner in which the truth is told makes the whole experience even more harrowing and the whole story more powerful and emotional. The shock of the trauma becomes greater when the horrid details of repeated sexual assaults are described, together with the silence and complicity of the nuns in the orphanage and the blindness of the authorities who should have protected the boys. The reader's admiration for the hero of the story, the narrator and the protagonist, who managed to live through the whole experience and set his life on the right course, is established

through understanding these details. Baca proves that he is well-versed in American literary history and, using Melville's technique of multiple perspectives and voices, builds his self-narrative.

Another important theme that Baca's narrative deals with is the social context of the American society, especially its treatment of the Chicano minority group members. The title *American Orphan* suggests that the protagonist is not only abandoned by his biological parents but also by society and turned into "a no-future person" (9). Primarily a story of a personal experience, Baca's narrative also reveals how Chicano minors fall through the cracks of the system, how they are criminalized and condemned to the criminal path of no return, how often such a path also leads to addiction. Furthermore, his narrative shows how poverty and discrimination erode family relationships, and how all of these forces combined destroy generations of Chicano youth, to whom the promised land of opportunities has denied their dreams/ the American Dream:

> I would have fought it if I could see it, but I understood in a vague way that it was a system made of rules and regulations upheld by corrupt judges, lawyers and cops to break me, a system I could feel pressing down on me every day, a force as real as my blood and bones. The system turned us against each other because of the color of our skin or ethnicity or the gangs we belonged to in order to make us wage war against each other. The system broke us down day by day. . . . It was a faceless system, everywhere and nowhere, present but never visible. Its mission was to destroy us, criminalizing us in ways we could never recover from, teaching us to hate each other; blacks against whites, Chicanos and Indians against whites and blacks, turning us into racists—greedy and manipulative, when we never were before. (10)

The narrator begins the passage with the pronoun "I" and then moves on to the plural "we" or "us." Not only does he identify with his own minority group (Chicanos), but he also draws attention to the fact that other minority groups such as Native Americans and African Americans went through the same process of discrimination and "reprogramming" to be turned against each other.

Baca is very successful in representing the social and historical context in which young Mexican Americans found themselves. His narrator often uses broken English grammar, informal expressions and many Spanish words and phrases interspersed with the English ones to signal a sense of unity and joint destiny among the Chicano community. This internal use of phrases within a group can also be interpreted as an example of "masking" or "signifyin(g)," i.e. articulating one's own voice in the narrative (Gates 131). The postmodern critics draw attention to the "problem of writing the self into being through the language of the oppressor" (Bergland 132). As it is very difficult for minority writers to realize their own voice and identity using the language of those who discriminate against them, Baca uses these shifts in voice, the already-mentioned technique typical in life narratives, going back and forth with his language between a traumatized Chicano youth freshly released from prison and a grown up narrator with a successful career and a place in American society. In either of these voices, however, the narrator never wavers from the commitment to telling the truth about the Chicano experience. Towards the end of the narrative, he sums up his story as: "I can tell you that beneath that brown parchment of my face that this is what you'll go through to get there: another and another violent subjugation of an American orphan caught in the system who will survive, though many will not" (166). This statement Baca's narrator makes reveals the most important aspects of the Chicano American experience: the color line that remains fixed as an almost unsurpassable barrier, the violence both within their own community and within the system and the overall negligent attitude of American society towards its minority citizens and the uncertainty following all Chicanos all their lives. Baca admits that he is among the lucky ones despite all the hardships, but he is also fully aware that there are many more underprivileged ones who are utterly orphaned by American society.

The American Classics and *American Orphan*

Besides being grounded in personal and collective experiences, a particularly important aspect of Baca's life narrative is its connection with some of the well-known works of classic American literature. Among the American stories of self-realization and soul-searching, Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* immediately comes to mind. Thoreau's

project of building a house as a metaphor for building a soul represents the iconic American journey of self-discovery in nature (Stone 5). Baca's protagonist Orlando also spends a lot of time in nature after his release from prison. These contemplative passages when he goes fishing pondering about his future prospects and what he could do to avoid turning back to criminal activities are reminiscent of Thoreau's stay at Walden Pond:

> Despite all of this distancing of myself from those who sought to aid me in my times of distress, to be honest, as much of a risk-taker as I was, I knew I was the luckiest Come Back Kid of all time . . . whether you want to call it God or the Creator, I felt it, felt this thing stirring in me. I was saved by this mysterious uplift in my spirit that always came on when I needed it. I don't know how to explain it, but it was a kindling of growing light in my spirit that filled my thinking with an adamant passion that, if I only had one break in life, I would take the journey to freedom and see what was out there for myself my way. (Baca 68)

Baca's narrator conflates his inward journey with staying in nature as in the Transcendentalist tradition. Just like Emerson's and Thoreau's personas, Baca's protagonist goes through a spiritual transformation during a deliberate retreat from human company. His sense of individualism emerges as he follows in the footsteps of other great American literary heroes who look for personal freedom through self-reliance and optimism. Writing also serves a therapeutic purpose of trying to find answers to his questions and dilemmas and atoning for the past mistakes. He offers explanations of his behaviors and acts to Lila, his brother and even his criminal friends while he presents a journey of self-discovery to the readers. It seems he is both trying to understand himself better and earn the readers' sympathy with his cause and plights.

Towards the end of the novel, Baca's narrator repeats Thoreau's project of building a home, relying only on his own strength and resourcefulness and finds pleasure in the simple, DIY endeavor:

> Without a second's hesitation, I get up at 4:30 am and jump into the work with joy. I pull out and strip the

> interior, clean the boards, cut off the warped ends and use them again. What old stuff I can't scrub new or clean up and use, I replace with donations from neighbors, who are happy to see the old eyesore undergo a facelift. They give me bricks, cement, roof tiles, windows, boards, linoleum, old sinks, a used propane heater, a kitchen table, bed frames and electrical wiring. (170)

The readers can draw parallels between this passage of Baca's life narrative and Thoreau's *Walden*, Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* and even Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. The heroes of these narratives cherish the American value of self-reliance and a self-made success. Thoreau's literary persona collects material for his house from his neighbors and uses his own hands to build a home. At the same time, he goes on an inward journey "to drive life into a corner" (Thoreau 88) and see what it is about. Baca's narrator, after many troubles, manages to find his inner peace and happiness doing things with his hands and with his mind (he publishes his first poetry collection based on his life). At the end of the novel, his journey of self-discovery is over. The quoted passage is also reminiscent of Franklin's carefully planned project of self-perfection: his method of achieving moral perfection also begins with breaking old behavioral habits, acquiring new ones and hard work. Fitzgerald applied the same technique when he created Gatsby, a boy of humble origins with big dreams and elaborate plans to fulfill them by creating a new identity. When Nick finds Gatsby's old diary, the reader understands how Franklin's plan is practically applied—a detailed schedule of everyday activities, which include building strength (e.g. dumbbell exercise, baseball and sports), improving one's mind (e.g. reading at least one book or a magazine per week) and doing something useful for the community (e.g. being good to parents) (Fitzgerald 171). Baca's protagonist, just like Baca himself, also tries to give something back to the community by engaging in various mind-improving and empowering activities for former prisoners in rehabilitation programs.

Another American value that Baca's protagonist follows just like his literary predecessors is optimism and (almost) limitless faith in the future. The optimistic, romanticist vision of the narrator's future can be read at the end of the narrative after a fire destroys Orlando's house and his notes for his first novel. Like Whitman's persona in "Song of Myself," Baca's narrator also feels one with the world, encouraged, rather than defeated, by the horrible experience:

> God burned what I could not. God lightened my burden. In my mind, his low rumbling voice, like that of an avalanche, says, "Why carry this stuff on, why keep it? Take courage to be the new man, Orlando. It's gone, so now you start clean, free. Close your eyes a moment, say goodbye to them all. Clasp your hands in prayer, be thankful for this burning that has cleansed you of your past. No longer the orphan, no longer abandoned, you are a family member, a relative to all my creation, dear Orlando. The world is your mother, the Spring is your mother, the earth, the water and trees your relatives. Now, be the water more than you, be the wind more than you, be the moon and light more than you, and grow as they do, my son. I am your father, the Sun, Quetzalcoatl; I will protect you. (170)

The quoted passage reminds one of the final cantos of Whitman's iconic poem, which is also, among other issues, about the birth of a poet. Whitman's hero surrenders to nature, the world around him and all future generations ("I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,") while Baca's protagonist is finally able to let go of his troublesome past and to be reborn as a poet. Furthermore, like Whitman's bard, whose role is to sing the collective experience out of an individual one, Orlando becomes a spokesperson for himself, his brother and many generations of Chicano children and youth.

Conclusion

Starting from the early accounts of colonial conquest, the contribution of the Hispanic American authors to the body of American literature has been copious. In time, the perspectives have changed: in the past, the authors of life narratives were European observers like Columbus, Vespucci or de Vaca, to name but a few, who described and categorized the previously unknown continent from the perspectives of the imperial colonizer. Writing from the perspective of the colonized, Jimmy Santiago Baca's novel *American Orphan* is a new contemporary contribution of a Chicano author to the large body of American autobiographical writing and to an even larger body of American/Chicano literature. Hailed for his skill to incorporate his

interesting and unexpected life journey details into his writing, Baca tells the story of a Chicano orphan, a victim of sexual abuse by the institution meant to protect him, a former prisoner and an "underdog" in every possible sense of the word, who, against all odds, manages to fulfill his American Dream. At first glance, Orlando's story reminds the reader of the great American success story—from rags to riches and self-reliance. However, when carefully read, Baca's life narrative is a story of failure—the failure of the American system. Baca's narrative is a testimony of a native-born American minority, written from within, revealing the holes in the system and its disregard for the needs of vulnerable groups. Through Orlando's life journey of finding his own voice and articulating the horrible trauma that happened to him, the reader is also reminded of the fates of many other Chicano children and young people who have failed or will fail to do so. Baca's novel combines traumatic individual memories, a lived experience, shared by many members of his minority group, and a masterful narrative technique to produce a life narrative, which can be read both as a work of art and a powerful testimony of human suffering and resilience. This paper, hopefully, demonstrates how much of that technical mastery is grounded in the famous tropes of American literature. It could be said that "Ariadne's thread" which connects colonial writings, classical American texts and this contemporary life narrative is a universal human need and a prerogative to end silence and make individual voices heard, be it the voices of American children or the voices of American orphans.

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