

Poetics and Politics

Molina 1

FELIPE S. MOLINA

April 13, 1992

Poetics and Politics

Felipe Molina: Well, good morning, everybody. I'm glad to be here, even though I'm tired from singing all night Saturday night. We try to sleep Sunday, but sometimes we can't because we go home and do other things; but I'm happy that I made it this morning.

I learned many, many things from my grandparents. I always write about them, thanking them for taking time from their busy lives and taking care of us--not just me, but my other cousins--and teaching us the way they should, if we were their children. And it's a responsibility, a responsibility that is put on everybody and all adults. I just had a lady talking to me the other day. She was from the O'odham tribe. And she was asking me, "Felipe, I know you grew up with a traditional family. In our culture, every elder has the responsibility of teaching the young ones; it doesn't have to be your child, it doesn't have to be your relative, but it's, you know, anybody in the village." And that's what happened to me.

In my home, my grandparents were in charge of me. They were teaching me. Then I went to somebody else's house, and the elders there were teaching me or telling me not to do this or not to do that, or telling me what's proper and what's improper. So that's the way I learned many, many things. And I think that's the way the people should be now. Nowadays, you know, in this age, it's a little

Poetics and Politics

different. People are afraid to go and tell the children how to behave, how to act, what to know, but this is how I learned from them at home and also going to the ceremonies.

And in the ceremonies--we call it a pahko--my grandfather was a dancer. So at every pahko I always went with them, because they didn't want to leave me behind. And so I would sit there and listen to the elders talk, play with the children, listen to the songs, listen to the music, the dancing, and so on. I feel I'm very fortunate to have grown up with my grandparents, because everywhere they went, I went. My brother also. Sometimes, my brother and I would get home, and then we would play out what we saw the previous night, back home. And it was a great thing. Then we would invite the family, our cousins or the neighbors to come and participate with us.

This is what you will see if you go to a Yaqui village right after the Easter ceremonies here in Arizona and down in Sonora: the children are going to play out everything they saw in the ceremonies. Right now, they've already started, the children have started now. They're making masks, they're doing the dances, they're imitating the songs, and so on. So after Easter it's going to go for about three, four weeks. They're going to be doing this over and over. This is how we learned, by watching and by listening to our elders.

Poetics and Politics

When I started singing, it was about 1977 or '76. My brother and I, we said, "Let's start singing deer songs, just by practicing, you know, let's just start singing." And I said, "Are you sure?" You know, I didn't really know. "Absolutely sure?" Because we've never done it in our whole life. We have, but just playing; but he was getting serious. So I said, "Okay, I'll meet you at your house," or "I'll go over to your house, and we can start tonight." So it was Wednesday night after work. I went to his house, and then he came home from work. We set up, and we started singing together. And ever since then, you know, we've been singing together. Well, not every time, at every ceremony, but we try to sing together all the time. And this is how we started singing: just by him saying, "Let's start singing deer songs." That's how we started.

So we sang like that, and later we started to participate in the ceremonial cycle. That's anniversaries, village saint days or even going out to different Indian tribes and participating with them in their pow wows, or in their ceremonial dances that they do. We are invited to the O'odham Reservation to dance for a family or a church festival, and so on. So this is how we started. At first, you know, we thought it was good to just do it, but then... it's a service that we're giving to the community. We're doing it for them, and also to benefit ourselves, and teach

Poetics and Politics

the young ones.

I've been teaching the young children back in Marana and some from Tucson. Right now all the villages are having their Easter ceremonies coming up. This is Holy Week, and this coming Saturday is Holy Saturday, the running of the Looria. The deer dancer comes to us on that day, then he stays with us all day. So I'll be working with young boys. When I take them out to practice, I take them out to the desert, or sometimes at the house. Then we get together and we talk about, you know, where is this all coming from?

I explained to them the way I explained to you. I tell them that this thing that we're doing now is not something that came up fifty, one hundred years ago; this has been with us for many thousands of years. And talking with linguists about our language, which is close to five thousand years old, this culture started around there. This is how many thousands of years we've been working with these songs and dances. And even before then, I guess, it has been with us since the time of the Yaqui Nation getting together.

When you really look at it and what it is saying to us, it's the desert animals, the desert plants, the wind, the sky--everything is good. This is what we bring out to the people. This is what we sing out: we sing out about the deer talking to a plant, looking for a plant. We sing about

Poetics and Politics

the deer enjoying the morning breeze, looking at the clouds, anticipating the rising of the sun. All this is coming out during those songs. And the ceremony is set up that we sing like that. There's a time for the oceans, ocean songs, life in the ocean; the desert, the desert that we see out here; and the mountains; the birds; the morning wind, "the dawn wind," we say; and then the animals themselves talking to us. I tell the boys, I say, "This is what we are doing." And I say, "I'm telling you"--maybe I'll have four boys-- "I'm telling you right now," I say, "so that you are going to go out and tell other boys or other girls about this. So that that way it can spread into the world, because the songs that we're singing are good songs. And it's telling us something--that we want to take care of this land, the earth, because we sing for the whole world."

Then the water drum, that's the water of the world, I tell them. We don't waste the water. We bless ourselves after singing. People come up to us and ask for the water. They have their little bottles or little jugs or whatever. They ask for the water so that they can bless their homes or their sick ones at home. So there's actually a blessing in talking about the songs or talking about the wilderness world, the natural world out there, and what it all means to us. So this is how I'm teaching them right now.

I tell them, "Pray very hard, because the songs that we

Poetics and Politics

sing are like prayers." And then, "you yourself can pray," I say. "Pray that your family is doing well, that your sick ones can get well, that your family can have good health"-- we never pray for wealth, it's always health--well-being, mental, physical--"and that there will be peace on earth," I tell them. "This is what we want, even though our ceremonies tell us that we have to kill our brother, the deer, for the food, we pray for him, we sing for him, we dance for him, and then he gives himself up for us, that we may continue. And this is the way our ancestors did it and then passed it on to us." So I have to do that, because if I don't, you know, there's no meaning to it. They think it's just something that we do, and that's it. But there's a lot of meaning behind it, and they like it.

I'd like to share this one particular incident that happened as I was working with the boys. I told them this: "You're the ones that came up to me. You were the ones that wanted to participate and do the deer songs. No, it was in your heart that you wanted to do it." And they said, "yes."

"Okay, so from now on you're going to be singing the deer songs and whenever you sing, you're to sing with a good heart: everything pure from your heart, no evil thoughts, no bad thoughts, everything has to be good," I said, "so that the spirits from the plants, the animals, the rocks, everything, are going to give you power. You're going to

Poetics and Politics

sing this out to the people." And they said, "Good."

At this time in the ceremonial years, you know, we have no deer dancer, we just having singing; there's no deer dancing. But I said, "Even the deer dancer himself, he has to have this good heart that he's going to dance for the people. And so when he dances, he gets the power from the deer dancers of the past and also from the animal himself. The animal will go into him and that power will be for the people. And this is why we say that it's a blessing for the world that he dances." They liked the explanation. This is what I like to tell them. Because, you know, slowly but surely, I have learned all this from the elders, and I have started to see the picture whole.

So I took them out into the desert one day. We don't practice at home so that other villagers cannot hear us. Because this is a time we do not sing deer songs. So we went out to the desert, and everybody was happy to be out there. As you know, this year we have more flowers than usual. Everybody was happy. We were up in the foothills of the Tortolitas, and I said, "All of you are going to be learning the songs, so you're going to have a special power to do your work." And I told them, "Always be good, always be good and pray."

And in my mind, I said, I'm going to tell them something. I saw a hawk as we were driving to the place

Poetics and Politics

where we were going to practice. On a dry palo verde or a mesquite tree was a big hawk. From a distance it looked like an eagle, but it was a big hawk of some kind. Maybe a harris hawk, it wasn't a red-tailed, and I said, "Right now, we're going to do the song of the vulture. Maybe because the hawk is over there, this song will be about the vulture; it's like a hawk," I said. "Look over there to that tree and see what happens if we start singing or we finish singing." So we started the song, and I didn't look over there, because I was busy listening. But I could see that as they were singing, they kept looking that way to see what the hawk was going to do. It was really a hawk, but we were singing the vulture song. And then as we were singing, they said, "Oh, he flew away." That's all they said. "Oh, good," I said.

So, finally, there was one of the morning songs. You know, I was teaching them what to sing in the evening, midnight, and in the morning, and then the blessing of the world. And I said, "Well, right now we're going to bless the world, we're going to finish right now," I said. "We're going to bless the four corners of the earth." And in my mind I said, "please, God, show them a sign." You know, what we are really doing here. And I said, I hope a deer walks by as we're practicing.

And we started singing the blessing of the world. And

Poetics and Politics

as we were singing, I guess one of the boys looked to the side, and four horses were coming from a distance. And they were acting like deer, you know, they were trying to see where the music was coming from.

And one of the boys--he lives here in town--he says, "Oh, my goodness, what--they're coming over to us. What am I going to do?"

And I said, "Well, nothing, you know, they're not going to harm us."

"But I'm afraid of horses," he said. "I've never seen a horse come up that close."

And then I said, "Well, come on over here and sit behind us." So he sat behind us. And the horses came up to us. And here was the water drum, and the horses were standing there looking at the water drum as we were playing. And we didn't stop for anything.

My brother kept playing. And he says "I think the horses like the water drum, because they keep looking at the water drum."

And so the boys were very, very happy. "This, this is really nice," they said.

And then as soon as we finished, we offered the horses some water, but they didn't want any water. They were just interested in us and what we were doing there. So we blessed the ground that we were at, and then we went away.

Poetics and Politics

And every day afterwards, you know, they kept saying, "Can we go up there again? We want to see the--we're going to sing for the horses."

And I said, "No, that's just one part of what I was telling you. Because all of you have the power to do those things."

And they said, "Oh, that's really neat."

"But all you have to do is be good all the time. You do not want to be hurting other people. You will always have good thoughts in your mind." I said that. They said, "Okay." So they were happy afterwards. And this is what we learn from our elders.

Every ceremony, in the beginning and at the end, they have sermons. This is what they tell us: you have to love one another; always be good, so that when you die, in the next world you will be rewarded for what you have done here on earth. And one of the questions that will be put to you, they say, is did you teach your young ones your culture, your ways? They keep reminding you that you have to use this knowledge. Now that I'm getting older, I concentrate on the young ones and teach them the way that the elders taught us. This is how I started, and this is how I'm continuing what I'm doing now. And it is very hard, especially for the young ones, because we have to stay up all night. Sometimes they don't feed us on time, sometimes

Poetics and Politics

it's so hot, sometimes so cold, windy, but we have to do our duty. And many times it's very discouraging, you know: here you're so sleepy you don't want to continue, but you have to get up and do the things that we have to.

I grew up in Marana, went to the Marana schools, and always wrote things about my culture. Some of the teachers were very interested in our culture, in our ways, so they would say, "Could you write about this? Could you tell us about the Easter?" And that way I think they kind of encouraged me to write about my people. I started doing it, you know, in junior high, high school and so on.

And finally when I met Larry, we worked together on the deer song project, and I did a lot then. I continued doing that to help the young ones read about their people, read about their culture, their songs and understand. And this is one of the ways where it can be spread more, a lot quicker, I guess, than me going out to every village and explaining to them. But, like I say, I like to tell the young ones that what they learn from me they should tell other people. And then that way we can better understand and appreciate what we're doing. And like this one, Maso Bwikam, that I did with Larry, the Yaqui Deer Song book. We worked on it for at least five years, and then had it published. And the Wo'i Bwikam, Coyote Songs, the same; we worked on it for many, many months, and then published it.

Poetics and Politics

And this latest one, Hiakim in the Journal of the Southwest, we worked on this for a long time also, visiting with my friends and cousins down in Mexico and then getting it together.

I like to do these things for my people, but then there's the other side of what's going on in our culture. I don't know in other Indian cultures, but in the Yaqui, sometimes they don't like to share what they know, okay? And you'll hear that in Arizona and down in Mexico. There are people here that would like to tell about their culture so that people can understand them and appreciate what we are doing. But there are people on the other side that say, "No, you can't tell them that because this is ours." But, in my opinion, I want people to know, that we can better understand each other. Because we're all on this earth together, so I like to learn about other cultures, what they're doing, so that I can better myself.

And I like to share my stories, my understanding of our culture, because that way people can understand and appreciate what we have here on earth. Because every day, when I stay home in Marana when I'm not working, there is not a day that goes by that I do not see a saguaro being hauled down to Tucson or to Phoenix coming out of the Marana mountains, the Marana-area mountains. And my brother and I, we get very unhappy to see these things. I say, "What kind

Poetics and Politics

of people would do something like this?" You know, they don't understand that this saguaro is alive. And they take them out of the place where they're supposed to be and then haul them away. And I don't know. My brother and I, we care so much about the desert vegetation. We don't like it, we don't like to see it like this.

Well, he told me that where he worked they practically just shave the ground, just scrape the ground of the vegetation. He said he was very unhappy. So he said he prayed to God that some of these plants that they boxed-- they put them in big boxes--that they could survive. And then he said that if they survived that he would plant them himself. And he prayed to one whole section of them, he said, and talked to them, and they survived. But he forgot the other side, and all of them dried up. But you know, that's not his land, but it is somebody else's land, private land.

And he said that he was unhappy because that area that they scraped away, hawks lived in that area. It was a hawk habitat. He says, "I wonder where they went." And I said, "Well, maybe they went up to the Tortolitas, or up to the Tucson Mountains." And he said, "okay."

But you know, we have to deal with those kinds of things every day. Now you read in the papers about the environmentalists, they're concerned about those things.

Poetics and Politics

But the Indian people have been concerned about those things for many, many years, and we still are. And we pray all the time that these things will change. It's really--it hurts us, you know, deep inside.

Larry Evers: You should tell people where that land is. You are talking about the place along the west of the freeway?

Felipe Molina: Where my brother works?

Larry Evers: Yes.

Felipe Molina: My brother works--at that time it was called Continental Ranch, the area west of the freeway. They planned to make subdivisions there, and they tore everything down. And they lost their money, so now there's nothing there. But all those trees and the vegetation along the river was taken away. But I guess eventually it'll grow back. And then even up to the foothills, up to the Tucson Mountains and up to the Tortolitas, they were taking out big ironwood trees.

So those are the kinds of things that we have to deal with. Because, you know, we don't have big reservations here, or big landholdings, the Yaqui people. They only have the Pascua Yaqui Reservation down by San Xavier Mission, and then the littler villages here in Tucson. But we are still concerned about the land, what we see. Not just here in Arizona, but down in Mexico, or all over the world. And I'm

Poetics and Politics

happy that some people are there to fight for the land. We never get together and put up a big fight, but we pray together for this.

Larry Evers: Thank you. I was going to follow up on a couple of things, if you'd like. One is that it would be interesting to hear, if you're working with these young boys, what happens when they grow up. Is this something that they just do for a couple of years with you and then go their way?

Felipe Molina: The first ones that I started with, they're already in their twenties. Some are married, some are doing other things in the community. Some are participating as members of the Pharisee Society right now in the Easter ceremonies, and some are deer singing, and some are dancing, doing the deer dance. I would say about nine out of ten are still doing what I've been teaching them, singing, dancing. While doing that, they participate in other societies, like the Pharisees, that are in the ceremonies. And then, I recently started with younger ones, and these ones will, I guess, learn some songs, and then as they get older will do other things, and hopefully they will teach others.

Larry Evers: The other thing I was going to ask you to talk a little more about is the response to your writing in the Yaqui community. I guess you have had all different kinds of responses. It might be interesting to talk a little

Poetics and Politics

about that.

Felipe Molina: Okay. This first one, Yaqui Deer Songs, many, many people liked it: "Oh, we never knew those things." "We never knew the deer song went like this." "This is really interesting, this is neat," you know. So this book got good words. But other books, like this one, Coyote Songs/Wo'i Bwikam, we had a big--what would you call it?--a big incident from one of the communities because of the words that were used in one of the songs. But when we were growing up, our elders told us that this Society, the Bow Leaders, or Coyote Society, they are mostly a men's group, so they do or say different things that are not proper in a ceremony. As though they're mocking the ceremony, they say things; and so we have printed that here. And then we received a letter in the mail. And then we had to respond to it, because of what was said.

But I'd like to share this experience, too. I didn't get the letter. It was in a newsletter. But I think Larry received the letter. And the newsletter, I didn't even receive; my sister called me up and told me that there was a newsletter out in the community and I said, "Would you please read it to me?" And so she read the letter. And as she was going on, I was getting--my heart was beating faster and faster. I was feeling very upset about it: why would they say that? And so finally I said, "Well, thank you very

Poetics and Politics

much, sister, I really appreciate you telling me this, you know. I know what to expect."

And so that evening I was very unhappy, upset, and I had to go and walk. So I was walking away from my house, not even a mile from my house, three little baby coyotes came up towards me, jumping happily to see me. And I said, "Oh, this is really neat. Here I was really upset because what we studied in this Coyote book, Larry and I--what they were talking about that was not right--is actually what I learned from the elders." And then I said, "Then you came to comfort me," I told the coyotes. And the little baby coyote puppies--or pups, we'll call them--I don't know what they were thinking when they saw me, and they got so close to me. And then they realized I was a human being, and they jumped up and they ran the other way. I didn't even see the mother coyote on my side. And I looked down, and there was the mother coyote. Then I felt good again. My heart went to the normal rate, I guess. And then I walked back home. And I was so happy that this happened, and I said, "I guess I did something good." That did help. But I never write about something that's going to hurt the people, it's always something to benefit the people, to help the people understand where we're coming from, what we are expected to do.

And this last one, Hiakim: The Yaqui Homeland, a

Poetics and Politics

special issue of Journal of the Southwest, is what we just got out not too long ago. And this one talks about the singing of the boundary, the Yaqui lands. And again, we care for our land; we wanted to write about this and what our elders are saying. And so far, you know, this hasn't been out very long. I've been passing it out to my friends and relatives, and they like it so much. And then they can learn from the book also. But it's more good common sense; it's just once in a while, you know, you get people. But it's always good to hear those things, to know what they're thinking about.

Larry Evers: Okay, thanks. Maybe we should open it up, and let other people in on this.

Felipe Molina: Okay.

Deirdre O'Malley: You were talking about how people in the community have different responses to all the people learning about the traditions. And so how do the elders feel about people coming to see a pahko? Are they open to having outsiders watch?

Felipe Molina: Oh, yes. They're always welcome to come and watch and observe, but with good hearts, they say. Always come with a good heart, so that you can be blessed by the ceremony. This is just something that's open to the public, you know, anybody can come. Like this week right now, we're getting ready for the "big days," we call them, the Easter

Poetics and Politics

Ceremonies: Wednesday, Thursday, Friday--Good Friday--Saturday, and Sunday. People are welcome to come and watch, but not to bring cameras, notebooks, or recorders, but to just come and watch. You can even participate, walking in the procession, and be part of the procession. Not too long ago, I guess, there were not enough ladies to carry the three Marys, so they had to recruit non-Yaquis to help out, because there's not that many people that can come in and help them. Or they're too busy doing other things.

So if you would like to participate or just come and watch, come to any of the villages here in Tucson. We have the one here at Grant Road; Barrio Libre on 10th Avenue and 39th Street; and the new Pascua village on the reservation. Just be on your best behavior. Just yesterday morning, I don't know who they were, but some people were walking around with cameras in the ceremonial plaza, and the Pharisees will get them and confiscate the film. They'll take the film out.

And I was thinking about this, coming over here. In the past it's been very easy for people to come in and just take pictures of everything, record and do things. But now the people as they are getting younger--I mean the new generation that's coming up--they're getting more strict. They don't want people coming in and taking pictures, videotaping, or audiotaping. It's changing now, but in the

Poetics and Politics

past it was easy for people to come in and do those things. I don't really understand why, but I would think that, you know, this gets a little annoying when you're working, doing your duty, and someone is there with a camera. Because it has happened when I was participating. And as you are doing the ceremonies, you're very spiritual, you're concentrating on Jesus and Mary as He's suffering here on earth, you know, before His day, His crucifixion. So you're feeling all those things, but then there's people out there that are just concerned about taking pictures, or taping, or whatever. But do come. I'm not scaring anybody; come and see the ceremonies.

Bethany Leaman: Felipe? I have a question for you. I wondered in the context of the deer dance, whether it's in a ceremonial context within the community, or if it's a performance given for an audience, does the content of the songs change at all?

Felipe Molina: Yes, I had just explained that when we're singing, we're not singing because, let's say, we're doing a performance. We're doing it with our hearts. Okay, and then the heart has to be pure so that the songs will come out right. The deer dancer himself, he represents the actual deer, you know. He's not a young guy or man just doing the deer dance because he wants to show off. No, if he's good, if he's not good enough, doesn't matter as long

Poetics and Politics

as he's doing that part in the ceremony. And the people that come to watch, they are watching the deer spirit coming to visit us in the village, or in the home. And he brings news from his world, the deer world, the flower world; and then he comes and checks up on us, the Yaqui people, the Yoreme, the Mayo people. We're the people that have deer dances, and then he takes it back to his home. He brings his blessing to us, and then he takes whatever he learned from us to his home. So this is the way we understand it, and this is the way everybody should understand it.

And then this is what you will hear in the audience, also: "Well, we went over to New Pascua, and their deer dancer wasn't good enough," you know. "But I liked it better over here at Old Pascua, because he was doing a great job." We don't care about that. All we care is that there was a deer dancer there, and even though he couldn't shake his rattle well, he did this part.

And at the end, at the sermon, that's what they tell him. He, the Maehto, says, "Well, we know that you were tired last night. We know you didn't feel like doing this because you were sleepy, but you are getting a bigger reward up in heaven. This is nothing compared to what you're going to see up in heaven," they'll tell him, "the next world." And so that will make the person a lot happier.

And sometimes, when you perform like this, like we were

Poetics and Politics

saying, you do your work, your duty, the next morning you're not sleepy, you're not tired, you're not hungry, you're just happy. There's so much joy in you that you can do many, many things then, because you've received that power. But other times maybe there is something lacking and the next morning you're sleepy, you can't even sit up. You're tired, you're weak, you're hungry: something happened during the night. Because there were maybe people there with bad hearts that affected you or you didn't have a good heart yourself as you were doing this. But this is not just for the deer dancers or the deer singers, or other dancers in the ramada; it's for everybody in the ceremonies: everybody, including the visitors, the pueblo people, they also, they have a lot to do with it, too. They come to watch and see these things, so they have to come with good hearts. In fact there's a book called With Good Heart, by Muriel Painter.

Larry Evers: I think Bethany might have had in mind, too, what happens, say, when you go out to Pueblo High School or Sunnyside and do a performance there. Or maybe when you go to the Navajo Tribal Fair, or when you perform for a convention of scholars. I don't know if you've ever done that, but I've seen your uncle and other deer dancers do that.

Felipe Molina: Right. Is that what you're talking about?

Poetics and Politics

Bethany Leaman: Yes.

Felipe Molina: Oh, okay. Well, I would say that if I take my group out to Pueblo High School, Cholla High School, I explain to them why we're there. We were invited there to show them our culture, to share our culture with them, and then they would understand what we are trying to show them, to teach them. And even though it's not a Yaqui village, not a Yaqui home, still we bring the spirit of the deer to you to bless you all. And then I guess in the schools, religion is not allowed. But I say, "But our beliefs, you know, you can believe, you can take our beliefs and use them whatever way you want to, but this is what we are bringing to you as students."

And we have good responses. Like if we go over to elementary or junior high and do a dance or sing for them, they really like it. It has meaning for them, the young ones. But high school, I haven't danced at a high school yet, so I can't really say. I can see by their faces, by their questions if they learn something. But I can't say for a high school.

The young ones, they're really happy about it. In fact, I did one song for a fourth grade class about the Inca doves and the quails. I sang some songs about these particular birds, and they really enjoyed it. And they didn't say anything afterwards. But I told the teacher, I

Poetics and Politics

said, "You know, I'd like for you to ask them if they can write to me or tell me what they learned from me." And then a couple of days later in my mail I received a bunch of letters or thank-you notes. And some of them said, "Well, we were really happy that you came over, and we really liked that quail song because as you were singing I saw little quails walking down the mountain to the water." As I was singing and explaining the song to them, they saw these little birds. So that means that I've captured their hearts, or stirred something in them, and they're happy about it. And this is what we want.

I think it's too bad that many Yaqui people here in Arizona don't understand the language. They don't speak the language, so when we sing--I mean the young ones--when we sing they're actually missing out on our songs. But the older ones, people who are in their thirties, forties, they understand the language, so they know what we're talking about. But the young ones, the under-twenty-years right now, the language is not spoken by them, so they're missing out on a lot. But the boys that work with me, I tell them, "This is the song I'm going to sing. And this means that the deer or the bird or the animal is going to do this. And this is the hour and we're going to sing this song, and this is the right hour for that animal to come out and talk to us," I say. So they'll understand. And hopefully they're

Poetics and Politics

going to go out and tell the other children. That's the way it goes, I think.

Kathleen Donovan: I've been reading your work in the Journal of the Southwest on the Holy Dividing Line and the Testamento. Last week we had Leslie Silko here; and Almanac of the Dead talks about Native peoples reclaiming the tribal lands, and the Testamento is warning about the loss of the Yaqui lands. I was wondering if there's any sort of Yaqui prophecy about similar things, a reclamation of what's been lost.

Felipe Molina: What you read there, we got from my cousin, and I'm happy that you read something like that; but if you read the part where his wife tells about how we're going to lose our land and we're going to be left in nothing, it's still going on right now. I hate to say it, but the Mexican government is not protecting us. In fact, President Salinas was trying to really take away land that was set aside for Indian groups. He was going to relinquish or do away with that. And that meant the Yaqui land, also. So what was put out for the Yaqui land by President Cardenas, it wouldn't hold in government anymore. And so the Yaquis are very concerned about that right now. What they're doing now is talking with one another, meeting, and praying that this will never happen.

But I have people come up to me, non-Yaqui people, and

Poetics and Politics

say, "You have to do something about it, your people have to do something about it, too, you know, to keep your lands." And then there's people saying, "No, let them come in, let them live with us, because we're all from the same--we're all human beings." The Yaqui people don't hate the other non-Indians. The only thing they're concerned about is protecting the land. Because if we allow the non-Yaquis to come in, they're just going to tear up the land, like the way we see it everywhere else, you know. Even though they might be going to build something expensive or something that's good, you know, Yaquis don't want it disturbed.

And it's up to the young ones to reclaim it, because the elders are already saying they've done their part. "But the young ones are coming up to finish what we started," they say. And it is a sad, sad story. One of the elders talked about it and he says, "You know, in the past we've fought with guns, we've fought with bow and arrows to keep away these people that we didn't want on our land. But now we're going to fight with paper and pencils," he says. "The young ones are going to be fighting with papers and pencils to stop that."

And that's about it, you know, that's what's happening down there. And we're talking about an area that's about sixty miles long and about forty miles wide that we're left in, okay. And this is where the villages are, and this is

Poetics and Politics

where the mountains are, and then the ocean; but the rest is already taken away by the non-Yaquis. But, again, I can understand that, you know. Here we are in the United States. This is not Yaqui land, but we are allowed to live here.

????: Could you talk about how the deer songs are used in the Easter ceremony?

Felipe Molina: One of the deer songs that I heard last year was about three little quails. They went right up to the crucifixion and they were standing by the cross looking up at Jesus as he was suffering during his last minutes, as he was hanging on the cross. And the three little quails are telling the world, you know, "Who is this man that is hanging up here? We don't know him. We would like to know him; we would like to know who he is." So that is sung on Holy Saturday.

And there is another one that talks about the animals wanting to know who is this man that was crucified. So our ancestors, the ones that met with the Spaniards, Jesuits, that learned from them the Christian beliefs, they incorporated some of the old Yaqui with the Christian beliefs and this is what we are doing right now.

And it's a very sad story, I will say, if you are Yaqui, to go into the ceremonies and really get involved. But people that go, they do not really have their hearts in

Poetics and Politics

it, because what we learn is that in those forty days, Jesus is walking among us in those villages, and he is thirty-three years old. And then on this coming Thursday, he's going to become a very old man, and they're going to chase him through the village. And if you come over Thursday afternoon, you will see him as a very old man, "Ola" we call him, and he's going to be chased.

And he will whip the Pharisees that have been persecuting him, and then they will venerate him, they will worship him at that time. If you read your Bible, if you know Bible stories, you'll get the picture. And then on Good Friday, they crucify him. He's back to thirty-three years old, and he gets crucified. But at night, midnight, he becomes an infant. He's a little baby again. But Holy Thursday night, when they capture him in the garden, we venerate him. We recite the rosary; we stay up with him all night. No one can sleep, we say.

This is what I am saying because I started when I was seven years old, and I stayed then until I was seventeen. We couldn't sleep. It was hard, you know. We'd be falling asleep, and they'd wake you. They have little whips. They scare you or pop you. But if you have one that is too young, we make them sleep. When the special hours come for them to be up, they wake up. But after they capture him, the mother pulls up looking for her son. Mary goes out

Poetics and Politics

looking for her son at midnight, Holy Thursday (well, it's already Good Friday) because she is concerned about her son. And so you know, it's almost like a picture of a family--our families, you know, what goes on. You care for one another and so on. You care for your mother; a mother cares for her son and so on. So those are the kinds of things we see.

And with the deer dance, the pahko, the night of the pahko, the deer comes to us as a young deer, a little fawn, then he grows up with us during the night, then he becomes old, a very old deer. Then he goes home, and this is how we know, because the songs tell us these things. Malichi, malit--little deer; Maso--adult deer; Miaso--old deer went home. And in some ceremonies, the malit comes, then he gets old (in some villages, an adult) and then gets old, an old deer, and then becomes little again, little malichi. In some songs, in some villages, I hear them singing that when Malit, Malichi comes in, he grows up with us, and then he goes home as a little deer again. But some villages, they don't do that. They just keep him as an old deer going back home.

So if you really look at it, it's almost like the whole Easter ceremony where Jesus becomes an adult, an old man, and then an infant again. But it's all from this many years of working with Christians. And some of us people believe Jesus was with us even before the Spaniards brought him. He

Poetics and Politics

walked among us. He was a good healer. So when the Jesuits brought their religion, it was easy for us to just grasp it and work with it and sometimes we are more Christian than the Christians with what we know or what we practice. I was at the ceremony this Saturday, and I took a break. I had to go outside and drink some water or drink something. And there was a family sitting there. They weren't participating in any of the ceremonies. They came to watch, but they said, "Well, today there was a big event at the downtown here, it was at the park here downtown. There were going to be dances." And he says, "We were tempted to go. We all wanted to go and then we realized it was Lent." And then I said, "You're right, you know, because you know this is a time we're supposed to sacrifice ourselves: not eat particular foods, go to ceremonies, stay up all night, listen to the sermons, listen to the prayers, songs and then not do all those other things." And then this is what I said, "Here these people, they brought this religion to us, but they don't adhere to it. Instead they have their dances; instead they're having a good time. While we, the ones who received that from them, are suffering. We really devote our lives to it, and we suffer." And it is very ironic, we said, to see this. But many people don't realize that. They think it's nothing. But these forty days are very hard for us people. Especially this week, we can't be

Poetics and Politics

doing any laundry. We can't be ironing; we can't cut our hair; we can't watch T.V.; we can't do anything that's good for your human body. Everything has to be very spiritual because these are the big days, we say, we are being very cautious what we do, especially Good Friday. Good Friday is the day when Jesus gets crucified so nobody ornaments anything. Your hair is loose. Women who have braids, they hang their hair loose. No colorful clothing, no shoes, no watches, nothing, everything off your body just for that one day to venerate Jesus.

And that's a very moving day. It looks like he's really here for us. He's really here for us, and so we take everything very seriously. And I hope everybody understood it that way but like I say, it was brought to us and we got it so, so tight, we're clinging to it right now and then using our old ways with it. So this is the way I understand. And there was a question. Did I give an answer?

Toby Langen: I was wondering, in the Yaqui Deer Songs book, you ask where is sea ania and the person just gestures to the desert and says, "There it is." So, I was wondering how to think about that, I was wondering whether sea ania is somehow only down there in Sonora or is it up here too? And if it's up here too, what happens when someone scrapes the land like you were talking about earlier? If that was in

Poetics and Politics

some way sea ania, is it still there? It's a lot of questions, I guess.

Felipe Molina: Oh yes, well, I guess the best way I can explain it to you is, you know, this year we had this great wildflower show. That is sea ania. And then the beauty you see with your eyes, you know, and appreciate it all. It can be there physically and then it can be there spiritually in your mind. Then you can talk to it, ask for power from it.

But never to want to destroy it. And this is the way we understand it.

Larry Evers: I'll take you back around to the previous question. You were putting side by side the way you talk and describe the deer during the deer dance as a fawn, grown deer, old deer along side the way you talk about the Christ during the lenten ceremony who goes through the same stages. We make quite a point in Yaqui Deer Songs of saying they are never explicitly brought together. But I am remembering, when you say that, I was remembering the time at Christmas when Miki Maso was here, remember that? When he was here, and he was deer singing, and it was Christmas Eve, and he talked a little bit about how the deer dancer and Christ related in his mind. Maybe you could talk about that. It's definitely a way of understanding that we didn't put forward in Yaqui Deer Songs.

Felipe Molina: I remember that day. It was back in '88 or

Poetics and Politics

'89. The deer dancer came out. It was snowing a little bit.

Larry Evers: The 24th of December, right?

Felipe Molina: Yes. We had a fire going outside, and the deer was out there with his body naked down to the waist, and he danced for us. And the lead deer singer stopped and talked to us about who we are going to honor tonight and who we are expecting tonight is the infant Jesus, who's going to be born tonight. And then he said, "Look at this man here, standing here in front of you, all skinny, old, and this is himself, the Christ," he says, "because He is here with us."

I had already heard about that before, but it made me think more and more. I told everybody we were going to talk more about it, talk to him about it. But, I thought it was very interesting that he said that because down in Mexico, my cousin's house, they also said the same thing. That the deer, when he's being chased at a death anniversary, where somebody dies and a year later they do the anniversary for him, he hides from the hunters. And in the patio, there are arches set up with cane, and the people stand around them. The relatives stand there, the men folk stand there in every little arch. My cousin says this: "The people standing in those arches are plants, and the deer, he hides behind these people because he doesn't want to be killed. He knows he's going to die but he hides around those people, those arches,

Poetics and Politics

station to station." I didn't realize they had those arches numbered. They are 14 stations of the way of the cross. My cousin says, "he knows, the deer knows." I said, "Well, Jesus knew he was going to be killed too. He knew from prophesy that he had to give himself up." Finally, he dies. Then my cousin compared the deer to Jesus. He says the deer came to us, and then he also portrayed Jesus. We do this for anyone who was married, men or women, and a year after they die, we have to give the ceremony. But here in Arizona, we can't do it because we don't have enough singers who know all the deer songs, and we don't have the young pahkolam who can carry out the plays that we do. But we have it here in our book, and if I have young boys and young men who wanted to really do it, we could follow it from the book. Because when we do our ceremonies, they have to come up and help us, the people from Sonora. They come up to Arizona and help with the killing of the deer ceremony.

Like I just said a while ago, Jesus was among us before the Spaniards brought him. If you go down to Yaqui land, you see footprints, hand prints on mountains. We say, "Who did this?" Well, Jesus. Like this is a big boulder here and the boulder was soft or mushy and someone just put their hands like this. It wasn't carved; it was like an imprint. Did you see that one, Larry?

Larry Evers: Yes.

Poetics and Politics

Felipe Molina: We went up there, and we asked them, how come people don't come up to this place? "No, we don't want anybody, because if they come up, it's going to be vandalized." Only certain people are allowed to come and see these things. So, it's all one in the Yaqui lands.

Larry Evers: It was when the earth was soft. That is the idea, right?

Felipe Molina: It's as though it was volcanic, and someone just put their hands on the rock or their footprints and so on. It makes me think and makes me wonder, and other people too. So that's why the Yaquis are very protective of Yaqui land, and they don't want it destroyed. Right now, especially during the Easter ceremonies, they're praying for the world. Even though we have bad people and good people, we are praying constantly for everything to turn out good. In fact the Pharisees, as you remember, are the bad people trying to catch Jesus. In our culture the Pharisees wear a mask. They have a rosary in their mouth. They are constantly praying, also. Even though they are doing a bad role or an evil role, they are constantly praying not to have the evil overtake them. And the other people are constantly praying.

So, I hope you are understanding where I am coming from and what the Yaqui culture is about, because many people don't. They don't understand. They think, even some

Poetics and Politics

Yaquis themselves, it is just a show. It's just a story; it's just a time for me to show off. No, it's not that. It's really deep devotion. You are obligated to do those things. You're not doing it just for yourself but for the whole world.

Deirdre O'Malley: I'd like to change the subject, it was mentioned that you're working on a dictionary of the Yaqui language. I was wondering how that was being received and do you see the younger people learning the language?

Felipe Molina: The reason we started working on the dictionary is because we have a Title Seven program. Title Seven is the bilingual program here in the United States. And part of that is the Yaqui-English program. And here in Tucson our school district #1 is funded. They wanted a dictionary to help the young ones learn the language. And with Dr. David Shawl, we did a quick, very uncomprehensive dictionary, and we submitted it to the district. We have ten Yaqui language specialists or Yaqui instructors, and they help us review it. And so we reviewed it, and this is going to be for the district, to use it in the classroom. It is good that they accepted the dictionary and the language and teach it to the young ones. But it is not completely finished, we still have to review it one more time. Due to the Easter ceremonies, everybody's busy; we can't get together, maybe after Easter.

Poetics and Politics

Toby Langen: There seem to be a lot of people at the U. of A. interested in Yaqui culture, interested in studying it, maybe doing projects with it. Do you see their work in any way as helping the Yaqui community to achieve any of its goals, on language preservation or culture preservation?

Felipe Molina: I would like to see more people working with our language and our culture and teaching it to the young ones. I feel I have not enough time to do all this work. Right now, I see too many people doing something like translating The Little Red Hen to Yaqui, which is not really what I like to see. I want them to find a Yaqui story, and then translate it into English. Do you understand what I mean? I think The Little Red Hen is the one that tells about how she's going to make bread, and she needs help from the pig, and I can't remember all of it. But, in the end she says, "No, you can't have it because you didn't help me." But in Yaqui culture it's not that way. Even though you were lazy enough, well you were still lazy, you wouldn't help, at the end you are still going to get something because we are very generous. You have to be generous to one another.

Kathleen Donovan: When Danny Lopez was here, he spoke of the difficulty he has in balancing his travel responsibilities with his responsibilities as a teacher and the need to survive in the real world. And what you

Poetics and Politics

describe in the deer dancer's life, it sounds very demanding, physically and in terms of time. I'm wondering how do those of you achieve a balance between your tribal responsibilities and the need to survive and provide for your families and things like that.

Felipe Molina: It is hard. It's also hard for the children because they're the ones growing up in this. One example, these new boys I've been training, one of them does not want to learn the language, okay? And the other one grew up in California and doesn't know anything about Yaqui culture, so he's really happy to be part of it. And so here they go to school, and they have to mingle with the non-Yaquis. They're learning different values in the schools. So one day, in fact, I approached the father, and I said I would like for your son to help us sing for this coming Palm Saturday. You know, this was months before. "Well," he says, "I don't really know." He says, "My son, he's not really an Indian." He says, "he's more into the white man's world." And so I said, "Really, that's the way you think about your son?" And he says, "Yes." I hate to say this, but he says, "He's an Indian but inside he's a white man because he goes for white man things." I said, "Really." I couldn't believe it, and so I said, "Well, we're gonna see." So we started practicing, and he's singing already, and he did it the whole night. And I said, "Wow, this is not the

Poetics and Politics

guy the father described. He's entirely different." And so at the end, I talked to him and said the work that you did here with me, I really appreciate what you did. I am really grateful; I am really proud of you, I said, to both boys. I am really proud of you, because this was your first night, and you stayed up all night, and you sang with me, you played, you got tired and hungry, and you really made me happy. And then they said, "Good." They were happy to help me. In the future, if I might need them, they were willing to help. But again, the question is how can he do that? The father was saying he can't do that because he's more into that world; he's into that system and he can't leave that and go to you. But he did. I don't know what's going on in his mind, but it's really wonderful.

I feel like my first duty is to sing and then the other stuff goes second. I don't care if I don't work on Monday or if I don't work on Friday, but if I have to be here, I'll go. This is true not just for me but for other people. Especially if somebody dies in the village and it's Wednesday night and the wake is that night. The dancers, they have to go. The singer and the people who are going to pray, they have to be there. And they don't stay there for one hour or two hours, they have to be there all night. Well, not really all night, because they excuse them about 4 o'clock in the morning. So here are these people; they're

Poetics and Politics

workers, they're students, and they have to be with the deceased that night and the next day they have to go to either school or work. They have real power to do those things. But some people will say, "Why don't you do the wake on Saturday night or Friday night?" We cannot do that because that's not the way to do that. They don't want to miss a day of school; it works like that.