

# On Poetry, War, Language, and Baseball:

## An Interview with Martín Espada

By Catherine Crohan and Lyn Miller-Lachmann

On Thursday, March 20, 2003, poet Martín Espada came to speak at Siena College and to read from his recently published collection *Alabanza: New and Selected Poems, 1982-2002* (W.W. Norton, 2003). The day of his reading coincided with the first day of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, and antiwar groups had called for strikes, civil disobedience, and other acts of resistance. In Albany, where Espada appeared, nearly 1,000 protesters gathered downtown, lining streets and blocking highway ramps. Dozens were arrested.

Perhaps in solidarity with the strikers, the first tape recorder used in the interview quit working, but only after 15 minutes was the problem detected and a replacement found. In those first 15 minutes, Espada talked about the previous month's cancellation of a poetry reading at the White House after it became public that some poets would read poems or make statements against the impending war. That cancellation resulted in the formation of Poets Against the War, the submission of 11,000 poems to a web site sponsored to the organization and delivered to the White House, and the publication by Nation Books in April 2003 of a collection of contemporary antiwar poems, in which one of Espada's works appears.

Espada talked about Poets Against the War as a "watershed in the history of poetry" in the United States today. Poetry has often been seen as marginal to U.S. cultural and political life, but this effort to censor antiwar poets has galvanized people and shown that the authorities see poets as a threat.

We asked Espada about the perception of poetry as an apolitical, "ivory tower" pursuit and where the impetus for protest comes from. He observed that the "grass roots" of poetry is more progressive than the elite. This may be seen not only in the massive production of antiwar poems that

appeared on the Poets Against the War web site but also in the boom in readings and performances across the country. Hip-hop poetry, poetry slams, and open mike readings have opened poetry up to a broader, more diverse audience. While Espada does not consider himself a slam poet, he takes the art of reading seriously, and he frequently reads in nontraditional places—community colleges, libraries, prisons, factories, even a boxing gym. To him, "the poem must live in the ear as well as on the page. Readings break down the barriers that separate us; these barriers include illiteracy."

We asked about the poets who influenced him. One was Pablo Neruda, to whom Espada pays frequent homage in *Alabanza*. He reminded us that Neruda was elected to the Chilean Senate after reading a long poem to the miners of his district. But while we have envied the political poets of Latin America, we should not ignore our own poets such as Walt Whitman. Whitman was introduced to the struggles of Latin American people through Cuban poet José Martí, and Whitman in turn influenced Neruda, Spanish poet Federico García Lorca, and Nicaraguan priest and poet Ernesto Cardenal.

Espada spoke at length about the place of history in his poetry. He sees himself as a narrative poet, one who tells stories. This tendency draws him to history, particularly to the "history that is not told" of Puerto Rico and other colonized places and peoples. In order to write an elegy for the Puerto Rican poet and activist Clemente Soto Vélaz, he had to delve into obscure, almost forgotten sources, and he said his training as a lawyer helped him with his research. He also seeks to profile people in working-class jobs. To learn about these people, he worked alongside them as a "poet-spy." He questioned the "Archie Bunker" media image of working people, the stereotype that working-class Americans do not

read poetry. And he cited his working-class father as a major inspiration for his writing.

**Catherine Crohan:** *In a number of your poems, you talk about your father and his influence on you politically and artistically. How did this take place?*

**Martín Espada:** In several poems I trace the evolution of a certain political awareness to my father, and that my father himself began to develop with one particular incident in Biloxi, Mississippi, in 1949. My father, who was in the Air Force, was arrested in Mississippi and sent to jail for not going to the back of the bus. It was his exposure to Jim Crow in 1949 that first radicalized him and moved him in the direction of social activism. From that moment his evolution and by extension my evolution as a political and social being can be traced.

**CC:** *We were talking on the way to the interview about censorship issues. In a couple of interviews with others, you talked about the NPR [incident] as the most blatant form of censorship, but there have been others. Can you give other examples?*

One example comes to mind readily. I have the honor of being banned by the Texas state prison system. I published a book of essays called *Zapata's Disciple* with South End Press, and that book, like many others I have published, has circulated in prison, donated by programs that help inmates with their literacy. In this particular case, the book was donated by The Book Project, and [the prison authorities] rejected it. They actually sent me the form for the rejection. The general reason for the rejection—and they referred to their regulations in this matter—was that the book itself might tend to incite inmates to unrest or riot. That sounded like a backhanded compliment that I should put as a blurb on the back cover of my next book. And there was a specific citation to a specific page that said this was objectionable because of some racial slurs. So I got my edition of the book from the shelf and flipped to the page to see what racial slurs I might have included. I saw that they were racial slurs used against me, which I disapproved of, and that was clear. Although the state of Texas will protect inmates by not allowing them to read my book, it will continue to kill them. A logical fallacy if there ever was one.

I've had other incidents that made it clear to me that what I had to say was not welcome. I had a bomb threat once in Tucson, Arizona. I was doing a benefit reading for an organization called Derechos Humanos that monitors human rights abuses on the border with Mexico. Just before the reading we had a bomb threat; people headed for the sidewalk. It looked like a fire drill, except they wouldn't let us back into the building. They brought in bomb-sniffing dogs, sealed off the building. We had no podium, mike, books, water, or chairs, anything we needed to do the reading. We decided to do a reading in the parking lot with the sun going down. So I did a reading in this parking lot in Tucson, Arizona, under a street lamp, the people gathered around me in the empty

parking spaces. It was one of the best readings I have ever given. Again, it's an example of how censorship, attempts to silence a poet, will backfire and produce something much more lasting and memorable than what was there originally.

**Lyn Miller-Lachmann:** *This is also evidence of the power of poetry, that it has become something the authorities have come to fear.*

You never know where that fear is going to go. My friend Earl Shorris has said writers can never afford to be afraid. You have to write what you write and say what you say regardless of the consequences.



**LML:** *I get the impression that after February 12, 2003 [the cancellation of the poetry reading at the White House over the reading of antiwar poems and the formation of the group Poets Against the War], there has been an opening for people who have not been able to find avenues for political poetry before.*

How long those avenues will remain open is anyone's guess. But there has definitely been a sea change. I would hope that the new openness to antiwar poetry will extend to a new openness to all forms of political poetry—that [political poetry] will no longer be considered an oxymoron. The availability of one kind of political statement will hopefully create opportunities for poetry of witness, poetry of conscience, whatever you want to call it.

In January 2002 you couldn't get many poets to come out and say they were against the bombing of Afghanistan. It was part of a larger chilling effect in the weeks and months following the horror of 9/11. My feeling is that the tremendous wave of antiwar poetry had its beginning there, in readings in New York City against the war in Afghanistan. That's why it is important to say what you have to say, even if it appears hopeless. Something happening there in relative anonymity began to bear fruit more than a year later in Poets Against the War.

Long before we did what we did, there were poets like Robert Lowell who went to prison as a conscientious objector. And even before that antiwar poets paid all kinds of penalties for saying what they had to say. What we have now, what looks like an antiwar movement among poets that is unprecedented, we cannot look at from an ahistorical point of view. It comes from a tradition; we have been drawing on that tradition. When I led a workshop on antiwar poetry [earlier this month], I started with Wilfred Owen, an English poet killed at the age of 24 at the end of World War

I. He has a great deal to say to us now.

**LML:** *We also have to look at poets of conscience throughout Latin America and Africa.*

Yes. I have always drawn strength from those Latin American poets, primarily from Neruda but from others as well. A very important Spanish-language poet who is often overlooked in this country is Miguel Hernández. A poet-shepherd from Spain, he was imprisoned by Franco after the Spanish Civil War and died in Franco's prison of tuberculosis. But before he died he wrote powerful antiwar poetry. I think of a Salvadoran poet named Roque Dalton, who was imprisoned and tortured. He was then assassinated, ironically, by people on his own side. But he left a great legacy of poetry against violence and repression.

**LML:** *When you talk about the Latino experience, you talk about it from a pan-Latino perspective. Several years ago, Multi-Cultural Review ran an interview with critic William Luis, who drew a distinction between Latino and Hispanic. He termed Hispanic those who identified mainly with the country of origin. In your collection you talk about the Puerto Rican experience, but you also talk about Mexican history—about the Revolution, about Zapata—about the Sandinistas, the war in El Salvador, the struggles for democracy in Chile.*

I use the term Latino as an umbrella term, inadequate to cover everything and everybody, but I prefer it to Hispanic, which is also an umbrella term, one as far as I know coined by the United States Census Bureau and not emerging from the community. Latino, which is short for *latinoamericano*, emerges from the community. I don't get hysterical about it. But you're right. I've always believed in a pan-Latino identity and a pan-Latino perspective. First of all, in practical terms the Puerto Rican community is so small in this country. If we are ever to accomplish anything politically and economically in this country, we are going to have to build bridges. We have to build coalitions with groups that share common ground. That means we have to build bridges with the Chicano community, the largest Latino group in the United States. It is not only good sense. We have a lot to learn from the Chicano community. It's a community with a long history of struggle.

Our common ground includes language, religion, and a shared history. Sometimes it's a shared history of racism.

I am inspired by and take instruction from the history of Mexico and the history of Chicano/Mexicano people in this country. The whole concept of *mestizaje* interests me, the notion that we are syncretic—a mixture racially and culturally. I don't see a contradiction between being pan-Latino and being Puerto Rican. I don't believe taking a broader perspective dilutes a Puerto Rican identity. Identity is not like a cup of coffee where you pour in the milk and it weakens the coffee. I see identity as multiple layers. I have multiple identities. It doesn't mean I'm schizophrenic. It does mean I can be a father, a husband, a teacher, a writer, a poet, Puerto Rican, Latino, simultaneously.

**CC:** *How does the notion of multiple identities translate into your language?*

I'm not the only Latino writer who has addressed this question. We are expected to live up to a kind of linguistic stereotype. Clearly, Latino identity transcends language. Spanish is an important part of our identity—I recommend that every Latino learn Spanish, know Spanish, go back to the country of origin—but is only one part and probably not the most important part. Latino identity is a bundle of characteristics. What matters is that after all this time we are still here, we still identify ourselves in this way, and we still have our stories to tell.

All too often Latinos are divided against each other, pitted against each other. Divide and rule. At this point in my life I am more interested in what unifies Latinos, what common ground we have.

**CC:** *Let's talk baseball.*

Okay.

**CC:** *I've heard you want to write a book on baseball.*

I want to do something different. We should always challenge ourselves and try to grow. I could go out and write another collection of poems. I'm sure I'll do it someday. What I envision is a book about baseball. It would be in a certain kind of tradition. More and more we see intellectuals, not athletes, write about [the subject]. Doris Kearns Goodwin. Stephen Jay Gould before he passed away. I envision a collection of short stories that would focus on Latinos in baseball but perhaps not exclusively so.

For example, I want to write an essay called "Williams and Williams." It would be about William Carlos Williams, whose mother was Puerto Rican, and Ted Williams, whose mother was Mexican, and whether or not that makes them Latino respectively. Was William Carlos Williams the greatest Latino poet? Was Ted Williams the greatest Latino hitter? I expect the book would also be in part autobiographical, focusing on my own futility as an athlete. It would have to do with my father again because my father was a great athlete. He ended up playing semi-professional baseball at a time when there were leagues everywhere. My father almost had a tryout for the New York Yankees in 1947. I envision [the book] dealing with a variety of issues I would define as media criticism. I have a problem with the way Latino ballplayers are represented. I am astonished at the fact that certain stereotypes prevail, that Latino athletes are portrayed as lazy and stupid.

I am struck by the fact that boxing, which is seen as the red light district of sports, seems to have more respect for Latino participants and their language than baseball does. When a boxing match on TV is over, there's a very good chance both the winner and the loser will be interviewed through an interpreter. There will be someone there who speaks the boxer's native language.

We rarely see that in baseball, where they employ an interpreter or allow the player to speak in his native language. Things like that need to be explored more fully for their socio-

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logical meaning. I also feel that [baseball] is a game and should be treated as a game. Whatever joy there is I want to celebrate. In a time like this of despair and crisis, this kind of escapism is understandable, aside from the pleasure one gets watching the game. When I pick up the *New York Times* in the morning, I go to the sports section first, and it's not because of my lack of interest in world affairs. I have too much interest in world affairs. I'd rather deal with the tyranny of George Steinbrenner than the tyranny of George W. Bush.

*CC: I'd like to talk about the glossaries in your books. A lot of times when I read poetry I don't know the references and they're not defined.*

First of all, I try to write in a way that is clear and concrete. All of those terms are relative, of course. I also realize that whenever I write a poem I'm also engaged in the act of translation, whether that translation is cultural, political, or linguistic. The desire to communicate leads me to create a glossary. The glossary can become more of a headache than anything else in the book. For me it's a kind of obsessive-compulsive act. There are more than a few obvious terms, but I'm always surprised by what people don't know. It's not their fault. There is a vacuum out there. There's a failure on the part of the educational system and the media to teach the dominant culture about other cultures, to teach mainstream society about Latinos, for example. One small way of dealing with that is the glossary. Why not help the reader?

*CC: The glossary gives your poems a broader readership.*

I'm essentially working in two languages. My poetry is overwhelmingly in English but with a very big helping of Spanish. It's useful to keep in mind devices for creating accessibility. It's about context, cognates, crossover words, direct translations—all of which are tools I can use to make the Spanish available to the English reader. The framework of the poem is in English. It's not that I'm afraid of alienating readers by using Spanish. My book's title is in Spanish—*Alabanza*—which leads to some very interesting discussion. How many times do you see a book primarily in English with a title in Spanish? I felt it was the best word to sum up 20 years' work: *alabanza*, praise. I like the way it sounded too. And once a poet gets stuck on the way a word sounds, it's all over.

*LML: It reminds me of that song by [Puerto Rican singer] Roy Brown.*

Exactly. As a matter of fact, at the beginning of the book I directly cite an epigraph by Juan Antonio Corretjer. He was the national poet of Puerto Rico, and he went to prison due to his advocacy of independence for the island. He was very close to my friend Clemente Soto Vélaz. I read Corretjer. I met him. I organized events on behalf of Corretjer. One of his most famous poems, "Oubao-Moin," is an ode to the history of the working class of Puerto Rico—Spanish, African, and Native. At the end of the poem he breaks into a song of praise—"alabanza," he says, "alabanza." So I'm not only using the word "praise," I'm using it in that tradition, in praise of the people he praised.

*LML: And that's the song Roy Brown recorded.*

Yes. Brown adapted the poem beautifully. And he ends with the word *alabanza*, which is only used in the Corretjer poem a couple of times. And [Brown] turns it into this extraordinary kind of crescendo.

One of the most frustrating things about being a Latino poet is that so many people regardless of their education seem to believe that Latinos have no literary culture, that we do not read, that we do not write, that we have no literary history and influences. All of that is profoundly false. I went out of my way, by choosing the title, to refute that notion. 