

VIVENCIAS: Reports from the field

JESÚS COLÓN'S TRUTH-SEEKING DISCIPLE: AN INTERVIEW WITH MARTÍN ESPADA

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Martín Espada, the author of eight collections of poetry, including his most recent *The Republic of Poetry* (2006), was interviewed at the United States Coast Guard Academy, in New London, Connecticut, on March 24, 2005. During his prolific career, Espada has been compared with such eminent persons as Pablo Neruda and has been called the “Latino Poet of his Generation.” The recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and numerous literary awards, including the Paterson Award for Sustained Literary Achievement for *Alabanza*, and the American Book Award for *Imagine the Angels of Bread* (1996), Espada has also published a collection of essays, *Zapata's Disciple* (1998), and has edited two anthologies, *El Coro* (1997) and *Poetry Like Bread* (2000).

Interviewer: Much of your poetry is based on your experiences working in various jobs – from gas station attendant in Gaithersburg, Maryland, to tenant lawyer in Chelsea, Massachusetts; through these poems you provide a social commentary and refreshing perspective on history. In this regard, how would you compare your works to those of Puerto Rican writers like Bernardo Vega or Jesús Colón whose works also provided similar critiques and perspectives?

Espada: Bernardo Vega and Jesús Colón are what we today would call “pioneros.” They were pioneers in the Puerto Rican community in terms of settlement and migration. I was very influenced by Jesús Colón, as a matter of fact. I can remember getting a hold of his book – his collection of essays – years ago and reading it, and being very impressed. Jesús Colón was one of those writers who encouraged me in the long run to see my own life as worthy of poetry. The autobiography is one possible impulse for my writing. You need permission to do that. You need to believe that something valid is



there in your life, which can be expressed on paper. Jesús Colón gave me that permission. I became familiar with Bernardo Vega later, but Colón most influenced me. If you look at both writers, you will see that they are both dealing with a hardcore working-class experience. They are dealing with some very painful struggles against racism and their work as writers and activists made it easier for generations to come. So I would not compare myself with these writers in terms of hardship. They went through more difficult experiences than anything I ever went through, just like my father went through some tough times. Not coincidentally, there are some things I encountered that my son will never have to deal with. But Vega and Colón made it easier for people like me.

Interviewer: One criticism of mainstream autobiographical works written by Latinos is that they provide a stereotypical image perhaps popularized by Piri Thomas' *Down These Mean Streets*, but certainly embraced by American audiences. However, you have defied that stereotype. Poems such as "My Native Costume," poke fun at the idea and even personal essays such as "The Puerto Rican Dummy and The Merciful Son" have used humor to provide a satirical look at stereotyping. Has your use of humor been a conscious effort to defy stereotypes?

Espada: Absolutely. My use of humor is a conscious effort to defy stereotypes. It's a conscious effort, first of all, to get an audience to listen more to me. I believe that when your work contains a political or social message as my work does, you have to figure out strategies for reaching your audience. You have to figure out a way to get that audience to let its collective guard down, to lower their defenses. And where does that come from? Think about all the resistance in the schools, in the media, various institutions of society, to progressive ideas, to ideas which would change the society and move society toward a society of greater justice. Those ideas are regularly slandered, demonized and ridiculed, and people have learned to discredit those ideas. When you present those ideas directly, many times they will be rebuffed by those defenses that have been established in the audience by socialization. Humor is a way of relaxing an audience, of gaining trust from an audience. People like to laugh and when they laugh they listen. I find humor as a tool, as being very useful, obviously, in terms of simple satire, but also in terms of simple joy that I get in writing and speaking to an audience which is expressed sometimes from humor.

Interviewer: How else have you managed to avoid the stigma of having to write what has been referred to as "ghetto literature" – works that focus almost exclusively on drugs, gangs, crime and machismo?

Espada: I think the best way to answer this question is by saying that my focus is on working people. What most of us forget, whether we're inside or outside the Puerto Rican community, is that most Puerto Ricans work. Most of us are working-class people. Most of us came from Puerto Rico to the U.S. for the purpose of going to work. When we talk about drugs, gangs or crime, they are serious social problems, to be sure, and there are writers that have made

important statements about them, but that is by no means what I would consider to be the representative Puerto Rican experience or the exclusive Puerto Rican experience It's important for us to return to the idea that I am writing about working people. When I write about my family, I'm writing about working people. When I write about my own experiences, I write about myself as a working-class individual. I describe my roots when I write about my various working experiences – as a bindery worker in a printing plant, a bouncer in a bar, a night desk clerk in a flophouse, a gas attendant, a door-to-door encyclopedia salesman. Now I have an education. I am a lawyer, I am a professor, I am part of the middle class, but I have working-class roots. I never forget that. It influences the way I see the world and it always will.

Interviewer: Your works also reflect on experiences with family members, especially your wife Katherine and son Clemente, and as such, provide a story of your life. Would you consider your collective poetry a form of autobiography – different than the widely accepted form that may follow chronological order or other literary conventions – but a form of autobiography nonetheless?

Espada: I think it is a form of autobiography, especially the book, *Imagine the Angels of Bread*. That book actually had its genesis in a suggestion that was made by an editor at Norton who asked me if I would be interested in writing my autobiography. I said to her at the time, “I can't do that. I am much too young to write an autobiography. The story isn't nearly done.” She was thinking in terms of telling and selling a story, and it is difficult to sell poetry. But her idea found a place in my head, and what I decided to do with my next collection of poems was to devote most of that collection to autobiography. There's a section in *Imagine the Angels of Bread* called “My Native Costume” where I have written a series of autobiographical poems. The first poem finds me at the age of two. That sequence of poems runs until the last poem in which I am in my late thirties. So I manage to capture 35 years of my life in a series of autobiographical poems in *chronological order* . . . I did this deliberately and felt very comfortable writing a series of autobiographical poems. I wasn't ready to sit down and write a 300-page saga of my life. I didn't feel like I had earned it and it's not that I feel that I haven't had an interesting life – I've had an interesting life – but I don't understand my life quite so well yet to be able to write an autobiography in a conventional way.

Interviewer: As an artist, where do you draw the line between documenting or creating an accurate image of history and recreating history?

Espada: I have a bachelor's degree in history so I know something about the requirements of research from an academic perspective, from an historian's point of view. When I write a poem that is based on history, I am very careful. I do a lot of research, even primary source research, the way a historian would. Having said that, I am also a poet and I am fully aware that I can use what is known as poetic license, which I define as the poet's right to make stuff up – in the service of truth, some larger emotional truth. And there are times when I will

take liberties in a way that a novelist might, and I think that there's an implied understanding with my audience that is not only permissible but essential for the poem to be successful. When you read a poem, one question you always have is "how much of this is based on historical records?" You come to the question of "what percentage of history is invention anyway?" I maintain that what I do as a poet is not all that different from what historians do. In fact there is constant recreation, reinvention, reinterpretation; the difference is I admit it.

Interviewer: No autobiography can be complete; in your case, what types of events or aspects of your life do you opt to exclude as subject matter?

Espada: There are certainly things that I have opted to exclude, and most of them involve my family history. Most of them involve some very painful personal experiences within the family that I have decided to wait on. Eventually, I think that I will write about everything that matters to me. I've explored that territory and it is not only painful to me, it's painful for the people I write about. It's painful for my family. There have been estrangements, clashes of various kinds, long silences, because of things I have written. There are certain aspects of my childhood and adolescence that I have chosen not to write about, but I will when the time is right.

Interviewer: You have had firsthand experiences with censorship, the most publicized of which is NPR's refusal to air your poem "Another Nameless Prostitute Says the Man Is Innocent." NPR notwithstanding, to what degree have you experienced *de facto* censorship in your attempts to publish material?

Espada: There is a curtain over the machinery of censorship. What made the NPR experience unique for me is that the curtain was lifted to reveal that corroded machinery. I was told directly by the people engaged in the act of censorship that they were censoring. They didn't use the word, "censorship," but what they did equated censorship essentially. I was told that a poem that was commissioned by "All Things Considered" and NPR would not be aired because of its political content and because of its subject matter which was a man on death row. They gave me the smoking gun. Most of the time we're not so lucky. There are incidents when I know about censorship because it gets back to me. Someone squeals; someone tells me something I should not know. I am always a bit indignant but never surprised. There have been various attempts to repress my work. I had a bomb threat at a reading in Tucson, Arizona. I have received racist, ugly hate mail. I can point to various instances of *de facto* censorship. I know of one case an internationally famous magazine with a very prestigious editor refused to publish a certain poem because as this editor put it in a letter to someone else that I got a hold of . . . "I find the political speech too thinly concealed." What does that mean? Not only that the political statement should be concealed but that it should be thickly concealed. To me, this is a form of censorship because it doesn't speak to the merit of the work.

Interviewer: Critics like Paul John Eakin have referred to the autobiography as the art of self-invention. Has your poetry been a process of self-invention for you?

Espada: I think that's true. Certainly, it's a process of self-invention because poetry is a process of self-identification. It's a way of forming an identity, a way of deciding who you are. I don't know who I would be without being a poet. Who is Martín Espada if he's not a poet? I don't know who or what. Self-invention is part of self-identification. It's part of developing any identity. You make choices about who you're going to be and then you set out to be that person.

Interviewer: Certainly there are words in Spanish that, as the Nuyorican poets reminded us, cannot be translated. Even connotations do not do them justice. In what way has being bilingual contributed to your devotion to truth?

Espada: Being bilingual contributes to a devotion to truth in several ways. Most importantly, bilingualism for a poet is a matter of integrity. It's a way of saying, "this is who I am and you the audience must accept this and if you like it that is great, but if you don't, that is too bad because it's who I am." Being fluent in English, being English dominant in fact, I could have chosen to make my work entirely in English, and I would have gained much quicker acceptance had I (a) written only in English and (b) avoided dealing with Puerto Rican identity or experience whatsoever. Throughout the years, I have seen certain poets of color who have been rewarded by the mainstream institutions of poetry for the extent to which they do not identify with their community. I could have gone that way. Point in fact, there is not a whole lot of capital in choosing to be a left-wing Puerto Rican poet. The big bucks do not lie in that direction. Bilingualism is part of a person's cultural integrity and I will express myself in the first and best words that occur to me and if those words happen to be in Spanish, so be it. There are lots of strategies that come with bilingualism as it is applied to poetry. You can use code-switching for purposes of drama, humor, emphasis, irony, authenticity, intimacy, sometimes it's a matter of music in the words. But that is also a devotion to truth, if you use bilingualism in a poem as a way of making that poem better.

Interviewer: Of all of your poems, which do you think best captures the essence of Martín Espada?

Espada: "Imagine the Angels of Bread." There are certain poems a poet writes which act as a summation. There are certain poems that Neruda wrote that are statements about his art, his politics, his identity, all wrapped into one. "Imagine the Angels of Bread," as a poem, does that for me. It is a statement about who I am as a person, as an artist, as a political activist, it's a statement about my particular vision, about my hope for the future. It's a statement not only about my experiences, but about the experiences of other people who have been silenced historically and for whom I attempt to speak. It's a statement of an advocate as well, speaking on behalf of those who don't have an opportunity to be heard, which is what I always did as a lawyer, which is what I continue to do as a poet.



About the Author

José B. Gonzalez, Ph.D., is the co-editor of *Latino Boom: An Anthology of U.S. Latino Literature* and the founder of *LatinoStories.com*. He has been the recipient of Connecticut's Higher Education Multicultural Faculty of the Year Award and the 2006 New England Association of Teachers of English Poet of the Year Award. He has published poetry in such journals as *Callaloo*, *The Teacher's Voice*, *Calabash and Colere*, and has contributed critical and nonfiction essays to such journals as *New England Quarterly* and to *National Public Radio*. He is Professor of English at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy in New London, CT.

Latino Studies (2007) 5, 123–128. doi:10.1057/palgrave.lst.8600234