Inteview

On 9/11 and the Politics of Language

Sunday 11 September 2011, by ESPADA Martin, O'CONNOR John (Date first published: 11 September 2011).

CALLED "THE LATINO poet of his generation" and "the Pablo Neruda of North American authors," Martín Espada was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1957. He has published more than 15 books as a poet, editor, essayist and translator. His new collection of poems is called The Trouble Ball (Norton, 2011). The Republic of Poetry, a collection published by Norton in 2006, received the Paterson Award for Sustained Literary Achievement and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. An earlier book of poems, Imagine the Angels of Bread (Norton, 1996), won an American Book Award and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. Other books of poetry include A Mayan Astronomer in Hell's Kitchen (Norton, 2000), City of Coughing and Dead Radiators (Norton, 1993), and Rebellion is the Circle of a Lover's Hands (Curbstone, 1990). The University of Michigan released his essay collection, The Lover of a Subversive is Also a Subversive, in 2010.

Espada has received numerous awards and fellowships, including the Robert Creeley Award, the National Hispanic Cultural Center Literary Award, the PEN/Revson Fellowship, the USA Simon Fellowship and a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship. His poems have appeared in the The New Yorker, Harper's, The New York Times Book Review and The Best American Poetry. His work has been widely translated; collections of poems have recently been published in Spain, Puerto Rico and Chile. A former tenant lawyer, Espada is a professor in the Department of English at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. He was interviewed for *Against the Current* by John O'Connor.

Against the Current: Your poem "Alabanza" [see below] has received a lot of attention — can you tell us a little about it?

Martin Espada: I felt like so many other people at the time that 9/11 happened that I should say something, but it was difficult to say exactly what. I remember being very struck by a story that emerged at first through the BBC — about the fate of undocumented immigrants who were working at the Windows of the World restaurant, and were killed on 9/11. The poem sort of grew from there. I remember going online and looking at this video of the restaurant itself; it was a view from one end of the restaurant to another, looking through those big picture windows. I was really taken in by that, haunted by that — the image kept coming back to me.

I made numerous efforts to write the poem and then abandoned them because it was so difficult to find a way to talk about something that was so big.

As a poet, I was trying to find a part that could stand for the whole — that is what a poet does when a poet is working with allegory or metaphor, you're trying to find the part that stands for the whole. And it took me a while to recognize that this was the part that could stand for the whole — the Windows on the World, the immigrant workers who belonged to this union, HERE Local 100. There it was.

The poem itself is deliberately irregular, because it is supposed to surprise the eye, surprise the ear. It is supposed to intrude, break the rhythm, or establish a new rhythm, take you in a new direction. The word Alabanza, of course, means "praise" in Spanish. I'm not the first poet to use this word, but

I decided that I would use this word in the poem. It became not simply a form of mourning, but a poem of praise. It passes from mourning to praise. There is a way of praising these lives, of praising this work, and to me that is one way to remember those who were lost.

Now it was important to me then, it is important to me now, that the poem would end with a plea to recognize our common humanity. So it was not only just about 9/11 or only not about New York, but cities to come — because we knew what was going to happen next. So, here we are: Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya. The poem looks forward into the future, and it constitutes a plea to recognize our common humanity and to find some solidarity in that.

ATC: Does the union know about the poem?

ME: Yes. What happened was that the poem was passed along to The Nation magazine which was doing a special issue on the first anniversary of 9/11. Somebody in the union, I'm not exactly sure who, read it there and the union responded by sending me a letter, thanking me for writing the poem. The letter was co-signed by 15 different people on the union's board. In fact, I have the letter framed on the wall alongside a number of other far less significant honors, like the Guggenheim. To me, this is probably the single most meaningful response I've received to a poem.

ATC: It has been ten years since the attack. Has the meaning of "Alabanza" changed over time?

ME: I think "Alabanza" has changed in terms of the way it speaks to immigrants and immigration. Because when I wrote the poem, I certainly wrote it with immigrants in mind. However so much has changed and changed for the worse in the last 10 years, when it comes to immigrants and immigration. Think of everything that has happened think of Arizona, think about [the notorious anti-immigrant bill] SB 1070, think of the fact that there is so much open racism expressed against immigrants today as the economy continues its tailspin. It is not a coincidence that in bad economic times, immigrants are scapegoated because it forever has been thus.

So, in that sense, over the last decade, the meaning of the poem "Alabanza" has changed as the situation for immigrants and immigration has worsened. It is now, more than ever, a statement about the humanity of immigrants in a sea of dehumanization. If you look at how immigrants are treated politically in this country, it begins with dehumanization, it begins with creating fear in the population at large. It means treating the immigrant as less than human, as dangerous and threatening. Because "Alabanza" attempts to humanize its subject, it becomes relevant in a different way than when it was first written.

ATC: Given the overall amount of violence that was unleashed in the aftermath of 9/11, isn't it hard to remember those in the towers?

ME: Yes, it is very difficult to remember them, yet we must remember them. There is part of me that objects to the notion that the right wing might have expropriated what we call 9/11 — that 9/11 might turn into an annual ritual of patriotism, the same way that the 4th of July or Veterans Day have become expropriated by the right wing and turned into rituals of patriotism.

People tend to forget where Veterans' Day came from — it was all about the armistice after the First World War. It could be seen as a day celebrating peace and the desire for peace, and to celebrate those who work for peace. It used to be Armistice Day, Remembrance Day. There are lots of ways to approach that day in November, but instead it has become the property of the right wing and the flag wavers. By the same token I can see that happening with 9/11 in the last decade that it is slowly becoming something that belongs to the right wing.

The right wing has expropriated that day and applies its own symbolism to it. We have to take a step back and remember that that this carnage occurred without regard to the politics of those who died that day. It was carnage wreaked not only on people who were citizens but on people who were not, on people born here as well as people who were not born here. For me, the poem is also saying remember those who died on 9/11, but particularly remember that there were kitchen workers who died on 9/11, and that there were immigrants who died on 9/11. And that interrupts the flow of patriotic discourse. If you say that immigrants died on 9/11, that undocumented workers died on 9/11 — that changes the discourse.

ATC: Do you think that 9/11 has changed the country's language?

ME: Well let's begin with the term 9/11 itself. 9/11 is shorthand for something truly awful. And by using the shorthand, we sanitize what was truly awful even if we don't intend to do so. I use the phrase myself because that is now the accepted phrase in the discourse.

I remember the poet W.S. Merwin, speaking at Smith College, sometime after the events of 9/11, and saying "I really hope 9/11 doesn't become the phrase we use to describe what happened on September 11." He objected to the language as language. 9/11 is a big abstraction, and so we have to continue to do what we do as poets or activists — to make the abstract concrete, to make what is general (and palatable) as specific as possible, as concrete as possible.

So we begin with the phrase 9/11 itself, but to me in the wake of 9/11, what we saw was the emergence of a new wave of euphemism in the political vocabulary of this country. The euphemisms arose as a way of both explaining and obscuring what this government was about to do in the Middle East, and for that matter, what this government was going to do at home.

Then we have the most obvious example, the granddaddy of them all, "weapons of mass destruction." Here we have this language, this euphemism, which is designed to confuse, distract, and above all create fear. So what happens? It justifies the invasion of Iraq, it justifies a war that had absolutely no justification. Now clearly the war becomes its own justification, we are there because we are there and we can't get out.

But my very favorite phrase that emerged in the wake of 9/11 is "enhanced interrogation," which sounds a little like enriched bread. Enhanced interrogation describes what we used to call torture. If weapons of mass destruction was a euphemism for the bogeyman — the bogeymen being Saddam Hussein — enhanced interrogation came to serve as a euphemism for torture. Therefore, it made it much easier for us as a population to embrace torture in the name of security. So we can see this mentality now invoked on a regular basis.

We can see it evoked especially, I must say, on the Republican side and most recently with the death of Osama bin Laden. Because it was those on the Republican side (Democrats too) who took credit for the killing of Osama bin Laden and specifically linked waterboarding to the gathering of intelligence, that in turn led to his execution, his killing. People were very proudly coming out in celebration of torture.

As cynical as I am about political discourse in this country, I never thought I would hear something like that — people would come forward and take credit for torture and tell us that torture works. All you have to do is use the right torture on the right people. In order to get to that place, we had to change language. The word torture, by itself, is a real showstopper — it ends the discussion and it has all kinds of associations. So, we have to shift ourselves away from the word torture, and yet that's exactly what we are talking about. If it is a veneer, it is a very thin veneer when we use the term "enhanced interrogation."

Now I believe that this kind of language is the way of divorcing that language from its true meaning. Often the language of those in power is designed to do exactly that. It obscures rather than clarifies, its aim is to control rather than to communicate. It is the language of power. For me, enhanced interrogation is a prime example of divorcing language from meaning.

What I want to do as a poet is to reconcile language with meaning, to bring them back together again. A phrase like enhanced interrogation or, for that matter, weapons of mass destruction removes the blood from words, drains the blood from words. Our job, whether we are poets, activists, or teachers, is to put the blood back into the words, so the words are once again vivid, alive and charged with meaning.

ATC: You are considered one of the most important Latino poets writing today. What have the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq meant for the Latino community in the United States?

ME: I think what the war has meant for the Latino community in the United States is that vital economic resources have been drained off from this nation's coffers to fight those wars. The economic spiral in which we find ourselves cannot be ameliorated until we stop this insane spending of trillions of dollars on war. We cannot help people who are most in need of help, the social safety net is in tatters (to use an overused metaphor).

When the economy is in freefall and when the things you need to do in order to arrest that freefall cannot be done, then we turn to the scapegoats. Now we need scapegoats and who are they going to be? Well to be certain, immigrants have been scapegoated, but particularly Latino immigrants, particularly immigrants coming from Mexico and Central America. We can see this in the rhetoric that politicians use, which is openly racist, but in the fact that there is also so much violence (in the form of hate crimes) against Latinos in this country.

The impact of the wars on the Latino community is that Latinos have been scapegoated. And there is a price to be paid by scapegoats, anywhere, anytime. The Latino community needs those resources back, for education, for employment, for health care, and so in that way also the war impacts Latinos. It deprives us of the resources we need as a community. Of course, when we are talking about the immigrant strata, we are talking about those who are in the greatest need. Those who could benefit the most from those resources that are being drained off to fight one war after another.

Having said that, I think Latinos are becoming more and more relevant in the political discourse as our numbers grow — more than 50 million people. And as more and more come of age (it is a young population), more and more vote, form alliances and coalitions with those who have similar interests, we are going to see a paradigm shift in the way that Latinos are treated.

We must remember that in 2011, the borders of our existence as Latinos are still the borders of racism. When we talk about borders and who is crossing borders, we have to remember that, first and foremost, for Latinos the borders are the borders of racism. We have to cross those borders to get anywhere.

ATC: Why are revolutionaries and poets often clumped together?

ME: It is natural. For centuries poets have provided the language and vision which revolutions need to move people to action, to move people to imagine a different and a more just world. It's not enough to understand the pragmatics of organizing, we also need visionaries, we need people who can articulate vision, who can put vision into images. When I use language I'm very conscious of grounding my language in the senses. When we use the word image, speaking of poetry, that is what

we mean — all five senses on paper.

I'm also very conscious of the role of poets going back to Whitman, William Blake, Shelley who spoke as visionaries.

I'm not claiming for myself that I'm a visionary — sometimes I can't find my feet, I can't see around corners. I can't predict the future. But I consistently attempt to invoke the political imagination. I consistently attempt to visualize a world different from the world that we take for granted. And I understand that imagination is a prerequisite for action, a prerequisite for change. I also understand that those things that we say are impossible today are indeed possible.

In spite of massive frustrations and disappointments, if we look at the lessons of history, things do change. But change is not linear. We have to continually look backwards in order to look forward. Poets help us do that. Poets help us do that because poets not only find the words that remind us of history, but the history that is yet to come.

Alabanza: In Praise of Local 100

— Martin Espada

for the 43 members of Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Local 100, working at the Windows on the World restaurant, who lost their lives in the attack on the World Trade Center

Alabanza. Praise the cook with a shaven head
and a tattoo on his shoulder that said Oye,
a blue-eyed Puerto Rican with people from Fajardo,
the harbor of pirates centuries ago.
Praise the lighthouse in Fajardo, candle
glimmering white to worship the dark saint of the sea.
Alabanza. Praise the cook's yellow Pirates cap
worn in the name of Roberto Clemente, his plane
that flamed into the ocean loaded with cans for Nicaragua,
for all the mouths chewing the ash of earthquakes.
Alabanza. Praise the kitchen radio, dial clicked
even before the dial on the oven, so that music and Spanish
rose before bread. Praise the bread. Alabanza.
Praise Manhattan from a hundred and seven flights up,
like Atlantis glimpsed through the windows of an ancient aquarium.
Praise the great windows where immigrants from the kitchen
could squint and almost see their world, hear the chant of nations:
Ecuador, México, República Dominicana,
Haiti, Yemen, Ghana, Bangladesh.
Alabanza. Praise the kitchen in the morning,
where the gas burned blue on every stove
and exhaust fans fired their diminutive propellers,
hands cracked eggs with quick thumbs
or sliced open cartons to build an altar of cans.
Alabanza. Praise the busboy's music, the chime-chime

of his dishes and silverware in the tub.
Alabanza. Praise the dish-dog, the dishwasher
who worked that morning because another dishwasher
could not stop coughing, or because he needed overtime
to pile the sacks of rice and beans for a family
floating away on some Caribbean island plagued by frogs.
Alabanza. Praise the waitress who heard the radio in the kitchen
and sang to herself about a man gone. Alabanza.
After the thunder wilder than thunder,
after the shudder deep in the glass of the great windows,
after the radio stopped singing like a tree full of terrified frogs,
after night burst the dam of day and flooded the kitchen,
for a time the stoves glowed in darkness like the lighthouse in Fajardo,
like a cook’s soul. Soul I say, even if the dead cannot tell us
about the bristles of God’s beard because God has no face,
soul I say, to name the smoke-beings flung in constellations
across the night sky of this city and cities to come.
Alabanza I say, even if God has no face.
Alabanza. When the war began, from Manhattan and Kabul
two constellations of smoke rose and drifted to each other,
mingling in icy air, and one said with an Afghan tongue:
Teach me to dance. We have no music here.
And the other said with a Spanish tongue:
I will teach you. Music is all we have.

P.S.

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