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“Sword in El Caribe/Cousin to the Machete”

An Introduction to Martín Espada

Born in New York City of Puerto Rican and Jewish parents, Martín Espada is a man of manifold parts. As a tenant lawyer in Hartford, Connecticut, Espada has defended indigent Spanish-speaking immigrants against racist landlords and xenophobic judges, while as a professor at the University of Massachusetts he has awakened students to the rich and diverse literary traditions of Latin America and the Caribbean. Furthermore, as an activist and public intellectual, Espada has fought for Latino civil rights and championed the cause of Puerto Rican independence. Espada’s representations in the courtroom, the classroom, and the community are three faces of a single, multi-faceted endeavor: his steadfast advocacy of the emancipation of Latin America’s peoples to the south and north of the Gulf Coast and the Rio Grande. Espada’s deployment of language in the service of human liberation is not limited to exposition and argument, however. Interwoven with these rhetorical strategies is Espada’s poetic sensibility, which underlies and unifies his wide-ranging discursive and worldly activities. For Espada—whose surname is the Spanish word for “sword”—is *un poeta*, the kind of truth-telling poet whom a censorious Plato would banish from the marketplaces of his ideal republic, and the kind of subversive poet whom latter-day Platonists would exclude from the pages and airwaves of our own public sphere.

But Espada’s vision brooks no exclusionary measures, such as the separation between the personal and the public, or between the poetic and the political. Nor does Espada’s poetry rec-

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ognize those divisions marked by national borders. For the well-traveled poems of this *boricua* from Brooklyn guide us from the projects of his New York City childhood to the highlands of his ancestral Puerto Rico, from the verdant landscapes of Guatemala to the garbage-dumps of San Salvador, from the country roads of Nicaragua to the singing streets of Santiago de Chile. Espada's poetry unfailingly honors the dignity of ordinary peoples' lives throughout the Americas. Untiringly, his poems remind us that it is such people who truly shoulder the burden of our common history as the inheritors of colonialism and its aftermath. Thus, for instance, Espada's poetry exudes the sweat of machete-wielding sugar-cane cutters in the Caribbean and proclaims the lyrical rebellion of Mayan *zapatistas* in the mountains of the Mexican Southeast; it extols the noble voice of a black journalist sentenced to die by a vindictive judge and affirms the steadfastness of Puerto Rican janitors who sweep corporate floors in Manhattan while dreaming of their tropical island home.

But Espada's voice does not simply denounce and protest, nor does it solely lament and indict. The ringing beauty of Espada's poetry—its point and thrust, its song and chime—is itself a celebration of all that is life-enhancing and worthy in human beings. And as with all prophetic voices, Espada's mingles fury with tenderness, fire with laughter, and rage with grace. In sum, Espada's poems give the lie to the old saw that we have all heard before: that poetry makes nothing happen. For here is a poet whose work embodies the truth of an observation made by another great writer of *las Americas*, Eduardo Galeano, who says that while it would be absurd to think that literature alone can change the world, it would be even more foolish to believe that the world can be changed without it.