A Mayan Astronomer in Hell's Kitchen: A Review

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Review

Martín Espada. A Mayan Astronomer in Hell’s Kitchen. (W.W. Norton 2000; 84 pp.; $21.00)

A bearded Mayan elder from Chiapas, feet bare and broad at the toes from a lifetime without shoes, gnarled fingers clutching a staff (or is it the handle of a hoe?), is seated beside a straw hat on the ground to his right, rows of corn behind him. He stares past the camera—at what? The photograph by Antonio Turok is called “El hombre de maíz” (Man of Corn). It is the dust jacket illustration for the celebrated New York Puerto Rican writer Martín Espada’s latest book of poems, A Mayan Astronomer in Hell’s Kitchen (W.W. Norton 2000; 84 pp.; $21). But more about that Mayan elder later.

Espada was the keynote speaker for the fifth GVSU Conference on the Americas in October 2000, sponsored by the Latin American Studies Program. The former tenant rights and immigrant rights lawyer also read his poetry to large and appreciative audiences at GVSU, at Zeeland Middle School and Grand Rapids Union High School, and at the Matador tortilla factory in Grand Rapids. Brisk sales of his books and a clamor for autographs following each appearance testified to his skill as a reader, the power of his political message, and the general accessibility of his poems.

And Espada is proud of his accessibility. “It’s really about demystifying poetry,” he told me and my colleague David Alvarez in an interview, “proving that poetry does not have to be an elitist art form that can only be practiced by those who have studied the elite of the last 500 years.” Espada believes that too many people come to poetry with fear and loathing. “As a lawyer,” he told us, “I ran into non-lawyers who expressed legal opinions . . . they thought they knew about contracts, but ask them about a sonnet and these same people would cower in terror.”
Walter Foote

Espada’s avoiding the illusionary classless elitism of much poetry is connected with his major theme—justice. “I’m interested in justice, and I talk about justice in almost every poem,” Espada said in our interview. To talk of justice he writes openly about social class differences. In his book of essays, Zapata’s Disciple (South End Press 1998), he states:

I tell secrets when I write about social class. The great secret is that class matters, very much, in this society dizzy with the illusion of classlessness. Writing about class is to write . . . about how this system really works. (From the essay “Zapata’s Disciple and Perfect Brie,” 10)

The concern with class and justice arose from Espada’s career in law, from his experience as a radio journalist in Sandinista Nicaragua, and from his Puerto Rican background. “My poems describe my family, my friends, my community, and myself,” he said at GVSU. “They come out political because being Puerto Rican in the United States is itself a political condition.” An advocate of Puerto Rican independence from the United States, Espada is a leader in the campaign to end the U.S. military’s practice bombing of the offshore Puerto Rican island of Vieques.

In his west Michigan readings, Espada read selections from many of his books, including several poems from A Mayan Astronomer. The biggest “hit” with audiences was “Thanksgiving,” a long comic dramatic narrative about the poet’s first Thanksgiving with his Yankee in-laws which Espada reads aloud with appropriate voices. “Daddy” emerges as a raving militarist lunatic, a gunner in the Korean war (“. . . the people there eat kimch’i, and it really stinks.”), eager to talk about the new Navy missiles that “could jump into the smokestack of a battleship.” Daddy also has a cannon he made himself which he is eager to fire for his new son-in-law, but Mother restrains him, at least until after dinner. “‘Daddy’s family has been here in the Connecticut Valley since 1680,’ Mother said. ‘There were Indians here once, but they left.’” Her statement about the Indians “leaving”—a terse embodiment of American colonialist attitudes—becomes a great punch line when it is repeated in another context at the end of the poem.

One of the shortest pieces is a “found poem” taken from the catalogue of a Massachusetts community college. It is called “The Community College Revises Its Curriculum In Response to Changing Demographics” and informs students that Spanish 100 is now devoted to giving police “the ability/to express themselves/tersely/in matters of interest/to them.” The “liberal arts” in the service of internal colonialism!

Another poem which evoked laughter is “For the Jim Crow Mexican Restaurant in Cambridge, Massachusetts Where My Cousin Esteban Was Forbidden to Wait Tables Because He Wears Dreadlocks.” Espada calls this a “curse poem,” which, along with the “apology poem,” he says, is one of the easiest forms to write. Target of his curses is the Mexican restaurant where all the staff in the dining room is Anglo while all the staff in the kitchen is Latino. The litany of curses begins: “May La Migra handcuff the wait staff/as suspected illegal aliens from Canada.” It ends: “. . . may the Aztec gods pinned like butterflies/to the menu wait for you in the parking lot/at midnight, demanding that you spell their names.”

In our interview Espada said he often concentrates on his humorous poems because Americans can’t seem to discuss serious issues without laughter. But A Mayan Astronomer contains its share of very serious poems which Espada also read here, including the very beautiful “Preciosa Like a Last Cup of Coffee,” to his mother and to her the poem which opens Espada.” Here is the last line of his name in Spanish, the sword in the dust jacket. Does it matter that indigenous Caucassians and indigenous Africans who make their living by indigenous Caucassians, the machete?

One section of Espada’s Library of Lions” contains a pantheon of political prisoners. Among them Mumia Abu-Jamal, a well-known American journalist and advocate of killing a Philadelphia police officer, is seen to death, he is seen to be a rallying point for Americans and poets world-wide.

Says the Man Is In the Library of Lions” to the National Public Radio commentator to air the poem, along with commentaries by Espada.

Espada included the Angelo in the case, but others of Espada’s poems are secondary sources of political accessibility, but the necessary back story of the necessary back story of the “lions” are Andrew年轻, an Anglophone poet and editor to Espada, Abubakar, a film maker, and various New Yorkers: The final poem Espada read here is Not Testify,” describes his cousin, a man from the Bronx, who along the Conant Valley is a tragic version of the Thanksgiving story. “Thanksgiving.”

Meanwhile, back home in New York, October, 1998, the author of “Library of Lions” is Espada.” Here is the last line of his name in Spanish, the sword in the dust jacket. Does it matter that indigenous Caucassians and indigenous Africans who make their living by indigenous Caucassians, the machete?...
A Mayan Astronomer in Hell's Kitchen

Cup of Coffee," a tribute to his dying grandmother and to her Puerto Rican homeland, and the poem which opens the collection, "My Name is Espada." Here the poet analyzes the meaning of his name in Spanish—sword—and the role of the sword in the conquest and in the resistance by indigenous Caribbean peoples armed with its cousin, the machete.

One section of A Mayan Astronomer titled "A Library of Lions" consists of poems in tribute to a pantheon of political heroes of the left, among them Mumia Abu-Jamal, the radical African-American journalist convicted, many falsely, of killing a Philadelphia police officer. Sentenced to death, he is seeking a new trial. His case has become a rallying point for death penalty opponents worldwide. "Another Nameless Prostitute Says the Man is Innocent" was commissioned by National Public Radio in 1997. NPR then refused to air the poem, as it also refused to air a series of commentaries by Mumia himself.

Espada includes a brief note about the Mumia case, but others of the "lions" might send you to secondary sources. So much for immediate accessibility, but the poems are worth your gaining the necessary background knowledge. These "lions" are Andrew Salkey, a great Caribbean Anglophone poet who became a friend and mentor to Espada, Abe Osherhoff, social organizer, film maker, and veteran of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in the Spanish Civil War, and Sister Dianna Ortiz, an American nun raped and tortured in Guatemala in 1989.

The final poem of the book, "The River Will Not Testify," describes a 1676 massacre of Indians along the Connecticut river. This poem is the tragic version of the Indians "leaving" the Connecticut Valley which "Mother" mentions in "Thanksgiving."

Meanwhile, back to that Mayan elder on the dust jacket. Does he have anything in common with the immigrant Mayan astronomer of the poem which shares its title with the book? In that poem, dated "9th Avenue and West 48th Street, New York, October 1998," the "Mayan astronomer," "bronze skin, black hair in a braid, leather jacket" leans on the third-floor fire escape of a burning deli in New York's Hell's Kitchen district, calmly smoking a cigarette, while the crowd calls his name amidst the tumult of the firefighters "charging with hoses like great serpents."

Here is a rarity among Espada's poems—an enigma. Serpents are of course important in Maya religion. The Maya astrono-

moral knowledge, Hell's Kitchen is of course an area of New York known at one time for the kind of Puerto Rican vs. Irish gang violence Leonard Bernstein brought to the popular stage in West Side Story. David Alvarez suggests that "Espada is dignifying an anonymous Mayan immigrant in NYC by casting him as a bearer of his ancestral culture's astronomical knowledge," but adds "I could be hilariously off the mark."

I would like to suggest that the Mayan Astronomer of the poem is simultaneously a historic figure, a contemporary immigrant, and, when associated with the Mayan elder from Chiapas, possibly a revolutionary figure seeking justice like his compatriots the Zapatista Maya of Chiapas. In our interview, Espada, author of Zapata's Disciple, expressed his admiration for the Mexican-American community and Chicano writers. The cover photograph is taken from a book called Chiapas: Fin de silencio (Chiapas: The End of Silence). But, then, I could also be hilariously off the mark.