

## “Taking Back the Street Corner”

### Interview with Martín Espada<sup>1</sup>

*Martín Espada*

**Edward Carvalho:** During my interview with Professor Chomsky, one of the matters I discussed is my theory that today we’re seeing a similar governmental intrusion into the academy much as we saw in the ‘50s and ‘60s with the CIA using university space to learn more about the radicalism of leftist movements in South America. A parallel exists with the rise in the “hot-button” curricula of Latin American studies perhaps supported by our government for a cultural and anthropological means of subverting regimes. The U.S. seems very afraid of Chávez and Morales—it seems that more and more Latin American political shifts have become the “problem children” standing against the spread of Western democracy. And I wonder if the tokenizing of Latinos you’ve spoken about elsewhere is in some way related.

**Martín Espada:** Well, I think, first of all, that the powers that be in this country, and for that matter, the citizenry in this country, are only dimly aware of Latin America right now. Think about where we were in the early 1980s. Think of where we were during the Reagan administration. Latin America was *absolutely* front and center. The Sandinistas were the bogeymen for Reagan and his cronies. And those times have changed, to say the least. You know, Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales—these people are very much on the fringes of the political consciousness in this country. Puerto Rico—gone. Absent. Absolute invisibility. So I don’t think the fear is so much an issue with Venezuela, Bolivia, or even Puerto Rico.

The fear is right here at home. There is a fear that fifty million Latinos are going to overwhelm this country as we know it and try to take charge of its social, political, and economical structures. And that fear, of course, has been manipulated and encouraged by the media and politicians of various stripes for their own benefit. It’s interesting to note that it is considered an issue in this presidential campaign, although not *the* issue, because the zealots couldn’t run on that issue alone. Tom Tancredo can’t become president just because he hates Mexicans, and I suppose that’s good news. And yet, at the same time, I have seen some things across the nation that are so bizarre they defy description in terms of the backlash against immigrants in this country. When we’re talking about immigrants, we’re talking mostly about Latinos.

**WORKS AND DAYS 51/52, 53/54: Vols. 26 & 27, 2008-09**

I was in Seattle last year to do a lecture there at the university, and I was invited to participate in a peace vigil in front of the Federal Building in downtown Seattle on that Saturday morning. I was around—why not. So I went down there, and I spent some time standing on the corner with people holding signs, including a young man just back from the war who was fond of freaking people out by wearing his uniform and holding a peace sign.

Lo and behold, right in the middle of the first demonstration, there began a second demonstration. This second demonstration was obviously organized by people who clearly had no idea what they were doing and very possibly had never taken part in a demonstration before. They had a couple of bullhorns and some crudely made signs, and they really didn't know where to stand or how to get the attention of the passing traffic, and so forth. However, they very quickly got our attention, because this second demonstration was an *anti-immigrant* demonstration. They had chosen that very same time and that very same place to make their case against the invasion of the immigrants. What's funny about this—aside from the ridiculous juxtaposition—was that we were in Seattle!

Now, the last time I looked at a map, Washington State was not on the Mexican border! Seattle is nowhere near Tijuana. That's San Diego! Okay? Yet these people were behaving as if the "brown hordes" were pouring across their borders. This is what they had to do to save their very lives—to stand on that corner and crowd a peace demonstration into the road. It was kind of funny because we had taken up the best positions, and pretty soon they figured out that the only way to get any attention from the passing cars was to stand right next to us.

I was standing with a sign that said, "U.S. out of Iraq!" next to some guy with a sign that read, "Aliens out of America!" Eventually, I turned to him and said, "Look, I'll make you a deal"—and I said this loud enough for everyone to hear—"We'll get out of this country if you get out of that country!" Well, they didn't know what to make of that. And pretty soon they started interrogating the woman I came with because she had a Swedish accent. You know, that's the level we've reached in this country. It's absurdity. That scapegoating—call it whatever it is—that *racism* is so much part of the American psyche, the American fabric, the American *soul*, that politicians can push that particular button whenever they want and get the desired result.

As one of the few Latino poets in this country to have any kind of forum—to have any kind of visibility at all—I'm in an odd situation. You know, when you silence the artists and writers and activists in a given community, you are silencing the people who speak for that community. If you silence the people who speak for that community, you're silencing *millions*. And if you silence those millions, then you can much more easily dominate them; you can much more easily stereotype them; you can much more easily say whatever you want about them or do whatever you want to them. That is the big picture for me. So how does that impact me on a personal level? In some ways, you can't say. In some ways, I will never be privy to that decision-making process.

On another level, I can tell you—and this goes way beyond my own case—that no Latino poet in this country has ever received any major recognition for a book. No Latino poet in this country has ever won a Pulitzer, National Book Award, or National Book Critics Circle Award. There is a way in which—and again, you know this is important to put into context—we are not, Latino artists and writers and intellectuals, being thrown into jail these days. This is not the gulag. At the same time, there's an enormous amount of frustration because there is very definitely a glass ceiling, and we're very definitely banging our heads against it.

About ten years ago, I put together an anthology of Latino poets called *El Coro* published by UMass Press. I had to edit the bios, the biographical notes. I'm going through the biographies, and over and over again, in looking at the *best* writers we have, I'm seeing "finalist, finalist, finalist, finalist, finalist." There's a collective frustration there to which most people are completely oblivious.

**EC:** Do you think this racial prejudice, the sense of isolation or "unhomeliness" as Homi Bhabha refers to it, has roots in economic distribution? Is it also used to keep certain groups of people under control economically?

**ME:** Well, I think they're reciprocal. I don't think you can separate, in this country, racial and economic issues. I think racism and economics are linked in this country and always have been. You always have an underclass to do the hardest and dirtiest and most dangerous work. We can simply take a look at agriculture and see how this plays itself out. Because for centuries, this country—not only the South, clearly, but the country as a whole—benefitted to an *incalculable* degree from slavery. Slavery built this country. "Free labor" that was used for agricultural purposes was, in turn, used to buttress the economy of this country. Where would the Industrial Revolution in the North be without slavery in the South?

All you have to do is look at what happened since then; that even with the abolition of slavery, this country continued to be dependent upon the cheapest possible agricultural labor. And the exploitation of labor is considered both essential to agriculture as well as this economy. That hasn't changed, that hasn't abated. Now it's the Mexican farm worker.

To a certain degree, that's the most obvious example of what we're talking about, but there are so many other examples that could be cited.

**EC:** In speaking of the relations between resistance and labor, what are some of the fundamental differences between dissidence, insurgence, and terrorism? Do you believe they depend on the vantage point of those who control the political discourse? The more I've been reading—I don't know if you're familiar with Betsy Erkkila's book, *Whitman the Political Poet*—this is the book I would love to have written. She disrupted a lot of my thinking about Whitman in the first ten to fifteen pages of reading. She really presents Whitman's poetics from a Marxist standpoint, with a feel for the actual political

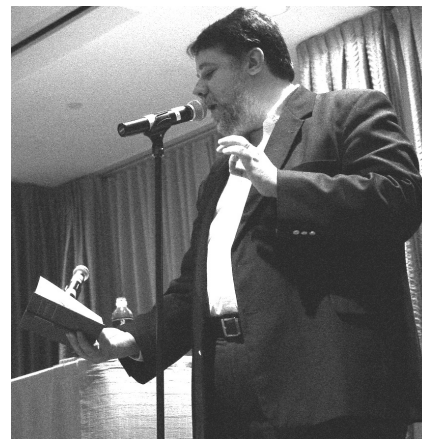
radicalism of Whitman in ways that I had not previously considered. In terms of his traditional canonical representation, Erkkila's book is almost a "politically incorrect" handbook to Walt Whitman—and I mean that in a deferential and positive sense.

**ME:** In what way?

**EC:** In that she focuses on the insurgent Whitman, such as with her commentary on the 1876 *Leaves of Grass* cluster "Songs of Insurrection." She disrupts the conventional representations of Whitman, who is traditionally thought of as the poet of American democracy. In fact, by the time of *Democratic Vistas*, he was seeing more in the *failure* of American democracy and condemning the policies of western expansionism of the United States, rather than embracing what he hoped for, say, in 1855. After the war, his politics and his views changed dramatically. And a lot of the other biographies—Reynolds, Loving, and so forth—seem to deal less directly with those issues and preserve some of the mythos, instead of addressing the historical reality that Whitman indeed had this insurgent quality about him. Perhaps this is the reason that Neruda invoked Whitman in his poetry, condemning Nixon and his administration.

For example, Erkkila talks about "The Songs of Insurrection" and says: "At a time when the national government was encroaching on rights traditionally enjoyed by state and municipality, 'Walt Whitman's Caution'—'*Resist much, obey little*'—reminded American citizens of the doctrine of local and state sovereignty" (265; emphasis in original). The fact that by 1876 [with the printing of the centennial edition of *LG*], he changed some of the order of the poems and included this specific section of insurrective "songs," really changes our definitions of Whitman's politics and poetics. Given the standards of the Bush administration, I do believe he would be regarded as more than just "dissident." Just look at the recent FBI case where [Plainville, CT] librarians were considered "threats to national security" because they would not release patron records in compliance with PATRIOT Act legislation.<sup>2</sup> Are they dissidents or terrorist sympathizers?

**ME:** Yeah. First of all, I do agree with the assessment of Whitman as more than a poet of democracy. I think he is a poet of democracy—small "d"—but it's a radical democracy. It's a grass-roots democracy, a working-class democracy, none of which we have in this



**Espada Reading Whitman**  
Boston Adult Literacy Fund, 31 Mar. 2004

Photo Credit: Edward J. Carvalho

country today. Whitman was also more of a socialist than even he would be willing to admit. This was one of the ongoing debates he had with Horace Traubel. One of the good things we inherited from Traubel's work is the notion of Whitman as a socialist poet. And that's Traubel's reading of Whitman—Traubel was obviously a committed, ardent socialist. Not only did he give us this interpretation of Whitman, but upon the poet's death he also made sure that the left wing in this country was aware of the legacy. So Whitman was embraced by the left in this country in the decades following his death, and it's a shame that it isn't still the case today. You know, I think the left has forgotten Whitman in the same way that they've forgotten poetry to a great extent.

My own feeling about the vocabulary that you're addressing is that, yes, on the one hand, it's certainly very subjective; you can talk about point of view as a major factor in labeling people as terrorists, or dissidents, or subversives, or whatever it might be. On the other hand, I think we can and should come to some agreement about what these words mean. Rather than simply dismissing it as an *entirely* subjective process, it's more responsible of us as writers and activists to stop and say, "Okay, let's decide what these words *mean*," instead of just dismissing these words out of hand and never using them again.

I think we can agree that what happened at the World Trade Center on 9/11 was an act of terrorism. I don't think there's any doubt about that. I don't think that we can dismiss the word "terrorist" just because of the way George Bush uses it. Having said that, anyone who would call a librarian a "terrorist" is an *idiot!* And what [the FBI] was doing, of course, was simply following the path laid out by the president, which is guilt by association—that is, the notion that "you're either with us or you're against us." This is the insidious idea that solely due to your *sympathies*, due to your identification *with* certain political movements or beliefs, you can be labeled a terrorist, even if you have never done anything in your life to terrorize anybody.

You know, this idea that if you are expressing a dissident opinion, somehow that puts you on the other side; and if you're on the other side, therefore, you are a terrorist. Well, it's ludicrous, but keep in mind that this is also a time-honored strategy. Think back to the days of McCarthyism. Think back to the days of the "Red Scare," and the notion that not only did you have communists to be concerned about, but there were also these creatures called "fellow travelers." There was also guilt by association. And there was a way in which this *gross* oversimplification of political thinking and of political action became the rule of the day. So if you were a member of the Communist Party that was one thing, but oh, well, maybe you were married to somebody in the party. Or maybe you attended some events that the party organized; or maybe you signed a petition the party distributed. Or maybe you belonged to what was called a "front group," which in fact wasn't communist at all but somehow was linked to communist activities or communist philosophies. And you could continue, logically, to spin that out to oblivion—into infinity.

I think in this country today, we see the same prospect, the same possibility. I think one of the things that has happened in the last eight years—with these two administrations—is that the repressive apparatus was put into place, and I think there was this anticipation that it would be used, and it may still be used to a far greater degree

than we can ever imagine. But at the same time, I don't think this administration anticipated (1) the degree to which this war would be *extremely* unpopular; and (2) the degree to which the occupation would be impossibly difficult. I don't think they anticipated it. The *hubris*, the *arrogance*, the *stupidity*, came together in this sort of *cloud*. That cloud prevented the powers that be from seeing, anticipating the way things were going to turn out. Because the occupation's gone so badly and because the war has become so unpopular, I think we saw less of that repressive apparatus used than what we otherwise could have seen. It's much harder to isolate and to lock down the people who are against the war when almost everybody's against the war. You know, what are you going to do? Lock up 200 million people? It's gotten to that point.

Instead of throwing millions of people in jail—which is very impractical—what this administration has done is to create distractions: the immigration issue being a foremost example of this tactic. You know, “Oh, look—here come the immigrants! They're the ones ruining your country and ruining your lives.” Never mind the fact that this is the most expensive war in human history, that all the money that should have been going into taking care of human beings is instead going into killing human beings over there.

We have found the perfect scapegoat: the immigrants. At the same time, I am amazed to see that as the issue of immigration has become more important in the national political debate, the war has become less important. I was amazed that Hillary Clinton, who has been so closely linked to this war, could win primaries in Ohio and Texas and elsewhere by running on everything but the war. You know, the war has *receded* to a remarkable degree in this presidential campaign. It's sort of incredible, but that's the strategy at work.

**EC:** I suppose this is where we can talk more about the control of discourse, because a large part of what we've heard during the war relates to the insurgency movement and how resistance gets tied to this overarching framework of terrorism, as well as actions that go against, say, American imperial statehood. Have such terms been corrupted by the war in Iraq? For you to identify with insurgence and insurrection as ideas, or to have an audience identify similarly, does that brand you in some way within the current administrative context?

**ME:** It certainly could work that way. There's a way in which certain language is expropriated by the state, and then you simply have to live with it because you can't compete with the state and the corporate media simply parroting these phrases hour by hour, day after day. After a while, you try to find another vocabulary. And yet, it's important to remember that these things too shall pass, that there will come a time—sooner rather than later—when most of these words will be returned to us, will come back to us. We can start using them again without irony or without concern over being misinterpreted.

I think that's one of the jobs the poet can do—one of the roles a poet can play in this process is to take language back from the state, take language back from the authorities. As I've said elsewhere, we live in a time when the authorities actively divorce words from their meaning. When this administration utilizes terms like “weapons of

mass destruction," "surge," or "collateral damage," those phrases serve to divorce, to separate language from meaning. In short, they drain the blood from words. What we as poets can do is reconcile language and meaning and to put the blood back into the words. The fact of the matter is that words are perfect engines of meaning. Words are not simply noise, and words are not simply there to distract, frighten, or manipulate us. With that said, if we can simply *reconcile* language and meaning in ways to *deliberately counteract* the separation of language and meaning carried out by the people holding political and economic power, then we will have done our job as poets.

**EC:** Taking the language away from a people, that's what Freire talks about in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Malcolm X also addresses this point in some of his speeches on African American history, perhaps even more forthrightly [than Freire], when he says that "[o]nce your language is gone, you are a dummy" (44). I think that this is one of the reasons American slavery perpetuated for as long as it did. The vast majority of Africans through their dispossession in a foreign country didn't have the ability to communicate, organize, or resist effectively because their white owners controlled the political and social groupings, the capital, and those related discourses.

**ME:** What we have now to a degree that's unprecedented in human history—and it does have Orwellian overtones—is this *machinery* of the media, radio and television in particular, to put out the message the government wants to put out there. Never before has such an efficient machinery existed to *inundate* us, to saturate us with the message that the government wants us to internalize. You know, that's something new that we have to contend with. Sometimes it feels—when a poet does go up against that kind of apparatus—hopeless. Then again, you think of other situations, which are even more dire. You think of the kid in Tiananmen Square facing down that tank and many other similar circumstances, and then you realize that a poet has to go on.

**EC:** As a poet balancing a creative life with a scholarly vocation, do you find any overlaps between poetry and academic freedom? Let me elaborate a little. Poetry, in many respects, seems to yet maintain a politically driven discourse and an agenda to distance people rather than mobilize them. At the same time, the university continues to be influenced by the constriction of academic freedom under neo-conservative policies and neoliberal practices. What are some of the ways assaults on poetry and academic freedom are linked, if any?

**ME:** That's a big question.

**EC:** It is a big question.

**ME:** Well, first of all, I would say that to the extent that our educational system becomes more and more privatized, becomes more and more corporatized, we face certain dangers with regard to our academic freedom. This is happening in ways that are subtle and ways that are *not* so subtle.

I'll give you one concrete example from my own experience. This is not something that happened here at UMass Amherst. Here, no one's ever told me what to do, or what to say. However, at the University of Kansas at Lawrence, there was an incident which dramatically illustrated to me the degree to which corporations have made inroads into the educational system.

The corporation I'm talking about is The Coca-Cola Company. Coca-Cola increasingly—in order to burnish its image, but also in order to sell its product—has gone into the colleges and universities to offer a Faustian bargain. The deal is this: Coca-Cola will give you money for cultural and educational programs, in exchange for which Coca-Cola will treat your cultural and educational programs like a form of advertising for Coca-Cola. This is aside from Coke's practice of monopolizing certain campuses, so that the only thing you can buy and drink on that campus is a bottle of Coke, Sprite, Dasani water, etc. That's going on left and right. This is something above and beyond that. What happens is Coke will give money—in this case, to the University of Kansas at Lawrence—and that money in turn goes into the coffers of a committee which invites speakers to that campus. Once the speaker accepts the offer and the event happens, Coke splashes the logo, "Coca-Cola" everywhere—on the flyer, on the poster. Any promotion for this event must mention Coca-Cola. The press release, the public service announcement on the radio, it's all about *Coke*, in the end. At the event itself, I'm given to understand, there'll be lots of free Coke! There may even be banners with the Coke logo.

All of this came home for me when I accepted an offer to read at the University of Kansas and then discovered that \$1,200 of the money that was being given to me came from Coca-Cola. I discussed this matter at some length with the organizer of the event, *who*, as fate would have it, was an old union organizer. He and I hit upon a plan. It would not have worked simply to give the money back, because if we gave the money back to the committee they would have simply turned around and given it to somebody else. Coca-Cola would ultimately get what it wanted.

So we came up with a devious alternative. What we decided to do was to get hold of that check ahead of time—which is no mean feat at any state university, by the way—put it in the bank, and let that thing clear. Then, at the reading itself, I would pass out press releases to the assembled throng and announce that I was giving the \$1,200 from Coke to the labor union in Colombia that Coke had been trying to bust. And the word "bust" doesn't do it justice. Because what has been going on for *years* in Colombia is that the union down there representing the workers at the bottling plants has been repressed in the most brutal ways imaginable. People have been killed.

**EC:** They hired a paramilitary organization . . .

**ME:** . . . They hired paramilitaries working in collaboration with the bottling plants—the managers of the bottling plants—to engage in murder, kidnapping, torture, and intimidation. There was one particular bottling plant where the paramilitaries gained access into the plant and *assassinated* the union leader *right there* . . . at the plant!



Then they came back and passed out forms for workers to sign that withdrew them from the union. They busted that union by shooting down a union leader right there on the premises. And the only way they could have gotten in that door was with the cooperation of the plant manager: in other words, someone affiliated with Coca-Cola. Coca-Cola, of course, maintained that these are independent plants, which is nonsense. Certainly, one word from Coke and this *barbarity* would cease overnight.

Moreover, we have the example of a very similar scenario that happened a couple of decades ago in Guatemala. Once Coke decided that enough was enough, indeed it stopped. There has been a campaign to pressure them into doing something about Colombia. So far, they have resisted doing anything. The only independent investigation of that scenario, by the way, was conducted by a city councilman from New York City, who went down there to see for himself the atrocities at hand.

Anyway, to make a long story short, this is what we did. We got that check and put it in the bank. I showed up at the reading; the organizer for the reading had invited some local media. And, of course, there was an audience present. I typed up a statement; I passed it out. We announced that we were turning over that \$1,200 to the labor union they were trying to kill off down there in Colombia. And that's how we addressed the problem. I have to say, parenthetically, we did get the money down there, and I got a letter from the head of the union.

**EC:** Really?

**ME:** Yeah—which I framed and put on my wall. I'm very proud of it. But there, in a way, is a very vivid illustration of the problem. You know, in a lot of ways it's more insidious, more subtle than that. There's lots of corporate influence and privatization going on in the nation's campuses, not as crude and blatant as what Coca-Cola's doing. But, by the same token, we have to call it *what it is*, and realize that that sort of practice—which is all about commerce—is *antithetical* to the spirit of free expression on the campuses of this country and elsewhere.

**EC:** Without a doubt. And I think the example that you cited shows ways in which intellectual activism merges in both the creative and scholarly capacities to resist these types of oppressions and force some kind of elemental resistance.

**ME:** There has to be direct action. I think that oftentimes we as writers and activists are satisfied with listening only to ourselves. And I think it's important to take some action. And that action could take the form it took there in Lawrence, Kansas, or it could take other forms. Maybe it is just a matter of standing out there in the cold with a picket sign, but there has to be direct action. There has to be a direct response to what's happening.

**EC:** Very true. I wanted to ask you a tangential question about the poem "Alabanza," which has been widely recognized since you

wrote it. In many ways, I see it as a transitional poem that segues from its eponymous collection to your later book *The Republic of Poetry*. I also think that in the political space of *The Republic of Poetry* you make connections between the Chilean 9/11 and ours that underscore the historical consequences of neoliberal practice.

With that said, have you noticed these kinds of shifts in the university since 9/11? Is there a post-9/11 ethos that has manifested here as well?

**ME:** Since 9/11, the word “security” can mean or justify anything. I think that’s just as true in the nation’s universities as it is in the nation’s airports. You say the word “security” and that’s the magic word. You can justify any sort of *stupidity* by the use of the word “security.”

**EC:** Sure.

**ME:** Also, there is more bureaucracy now than there was then.

**EC:** In what sense?

**ME:** Again, this is a scenario that justifies the accumulation of power. The accumulation of power at the level of the university means more administration. It means more bureaucracy; it means more paperwork. It means more decision-making power in the hands of the people who are farther away from the classroom. Students and teachers have less and less decision-making power at the university every day. Administrators, bureaucrats, and politicians have more and more power to make decisions about the university every day. That, to me, is a part of a post-9/11 ethos.

**EC:** Okay.

**ME:** And not by coincidence. We have seen on a whole other level how George Bush continues to bring more and more power into the executive branch of government, and thereby continues to centralize government. It’s not a coincidence. The fact is, for the most part, what politicians and bureaucrats have done since 9/11 is to justify the concentration of more and more power in their own hands. You can see that everywhere you look.

**EC:** It really does seem to me that repression in the university has become a corollary to what’s happening at the government level. I don’t think there’s any dispute over that.

**ME:** I think that’s true.

**EC:** I don’t know how closely you’ve followed this, but if you have, what are your thoughts on the Ward Churchill case? Do you sense that we’re going to see more Churchills around the country? Will we see more politically charged ideas from the academy subjugated to media concision, morphed into sound-bitten scholarship, where content is divorced from context and right-wing administrations, from governors all the way up, continue to influence boards of regents to weed out “problematic” professors?

**ME:** Yeah, the Churchill case should be a cause for concern. I do think that this was a rather blatant example of what happens when someone says something unpopular, and what he says ends up costing the guy his job. That shouldn't happen. That shouldn't happen in the academy. You don't have to agree with what he said or the way he said it—and I don't. Clearly, if you look at what I said in "Alabanza," I don't regard the victims of that disaster as "little Eichmanns."

Yet I don't want to take out of context what he said, either. What he said was more complicated than that. You don't have to agree with it, however—I stress that—you don't have to agree with what Ward Churchill said to defend his right to say it. Certainly, you don't have to agree with what he said to defend his right to teach at the university. That, to me, is a *terrible* precedent. Clearly, there have been other professors in the past who have said things far more outrageous, who have, for one reason or another, been able to continue teaching and doing what they do.

**EC:** Let's look at the next logical question: Is academic freedom tied to capital? Are we talking about academic freedom as a kind of strata, and, if so, does intellectual activism then manifest as an exponent of status?

**ME:** Well, to a great degree, those who have privilege and status have always had more freedom than those who don't. If you are at the higher end of a social hierarchy, you have an easier time saying what's on your mind than someone who's at the bottom end of that hierarchy. First of all, the person at the bottom end of the hierarchy won't even have a *forum* to say what he or she wants to say—won't even have the opportunity. But then if that opportunity somehow comes about, there could be consequences for saying what is on one's mind.

To be sure, privilege has oftentimes insulated people from the consequences of their actions. You can get away with stuff. I think it's important for people who have a position of privilege to recognize that this gives them the power to say what they should say! I applaud people at Harvard or MIT who have the guts to speak out, because they're the ones who have the least to gain from it. If you think about it, what does Noam Chomsky have to gain from being a dissident? He's at MIT—that could be seen as a sinecure. Why not spend the rest of your days with your feet up? Why was it that Derrick Bell *resigned his position* at Harvard Law School over a matter of principle, a matter which didn't even affect him directly? That man, Derrick Bell, is the epitome of integrity, in my opinion.

I support people at institutions like that who take the extra step, who take advantage of the fact that they're in a privileged setting to speak out against the very system that expects them to be silent in exchange for the privilege.

**EC:** The final question that I'll ask you pertains to the World Social Forum. *Works and Days* editor David Downing is interested in the relationship between the intellectual activism of academics and matters of injustice and opposition to freedoms happening in the global political sphere. What are your thoughts on this?

**ME:** The more you read and the more you think, the more you should want to change the world—and I mean quite literally, the world—not simply the neighborhood or the community, but the world. The more you read and the more you think, the more you should see how everyone is related. You should see the interrelationships between things and people. That should, in turn, motivate you to get involved with organizations such as the World Social Forum. But we should go *beyond* that. We should actively try to make the world a better place, and not just focus on improving our backyards.

**EC:** It's reminiscent of Pierre Bourdieu's statement in *Firing Back: Against the Tyranny of the Market*, where he argues that "today's researchers must innovate an improbable but indispensable combination: *scholarship with commitment*" (24). And I think that's what we're talking about here. One's research can't be so walled-off from actively contributing to social change.

**ME:** I see no contradiction between commitment and scholarship. I see no contradiction between commitment and poetry. Having said all that, if you are a scholar and you focus on the Dutch Barley Riots of 1709, there's no reason why you still cannot be an activist in your daily life. And, for that matter, if you're a poet and you're writing about the Dutch Barley Riots in 1709—for whatever reason—you could still go out and hold a picket sign on the corner. If you don't hold a picket sign on the corner, that place on the corner is going to be occupied by a lunatic with a bullhorn telling the Mexicans to go home. I saw it in Seattle. We have to get out there, as poets, as academics, as activists, and *take that street corner back!*

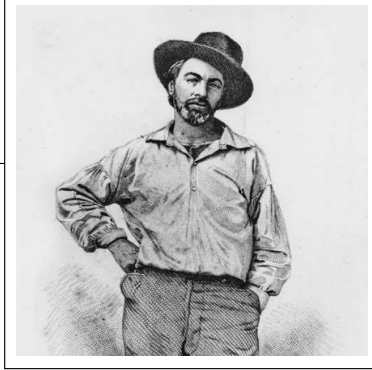
## Note

<sup>1</sup> Interview conducted at Espada's office (UMass Amherst, Bartlett Hall, 251) on 5 Mar. 2008. Interview transcribed by Edward J. Carvalho.

<sup>2</sup> See O'Brien.

## Works Cited

- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Firing Back: Against the Tyranny of the Market*. New York: New P, 2003.
- Erkkila, Betsy. *Whitman the Political Poet*. New York: Oxford UP, 1989.
- Espada, Martín. "Alabanza: In Praise of Local 100." *Alabanza: New and Selected Poems, 1982-2002*. New York: Norton, 2003.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Republic of Poetry*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2006.
- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed: 30th Anniversary Edition*. 1973. Trans. Myra Bergman Ramos. New York: Continuum, 1993.
- O'Brien, Luke. "Librarians Describe Life Under An FBI Gag Order." *Wired.com*. 24 June 2007. Condénet, Inc. 12 July 2007 <<http://blog.wired.com/27bstroke6/2007/06/librarians-desc.html>>.
- X, Malcolm. *Malcolm X on Afro-American History*. 1967. New York: Pathfinder, 1990.
- Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass*. 1892. New York: Library of America, 1982.



# WALT WHITMAN

## QUARTERLY REVIEW

---

THE JOURNAL OF RECORD FOR WHITMAN STUDIES,  
NOW IN ITS TWENTY-FIFTH YEAR

---

Over 200 pages each year of commentary on Whitman, his work, and his times, regularly featuring bibliographical and textual discoveries. Every issue includes an annotated bibliography of recent work on Whitman.

Recent issues have included **Jerome Loving** on the relationship between Whitman and James Osgood, the publisher of the 1881 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, **Ezra Greenspan** on an undocumented review of the 1860 edition, **Gary Schmidgall** on Whitman's conversations about bookmaking with Horace Traubel, **Brady Earnhart** on the Good Gray Poet and the Quaker Oats Man, **Joann P. Krieg** on Whitman and Modern Dance, and an undiscovered manuscript by **Whitman on Emerson**.

---

### THE FALL 2008 ISSUE INCLUDES

**Benjamin Hunnicutt** on Whitman's concept of "higher progress," **Martin Buinicki** on Whitman and Ulysses S. Grant, a note by **Michael Robertson** on the Bolton Whitman Fellowship, and more.

---

Ed Folsom, Editor

The University of Iowa

[www.uiowa.edu/~wwqr](http://www.uiowa.edu/~wwqr)

Subscribe today:

\$35.00/year for individuals, \$45.00/year for institutions. Add \$10.00 for overseas

