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# Puerto Rican Radical: The Effects of Neoliberalism on the Life and Work of Martín Espada

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PUERTO RICAN RADICAL:  
THE EFFECTS OF NEOLIBERALISM ON THE LIFE AND WORK  
OF MARTÍN ESPADA

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

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Indiana University of Pennsylvania

December 2011

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We hereby approve the dissertation of

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Title: Puerto Rican Radical: The Effects of Neoliberalism on the Life and Work  
of Martín Espada

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### Abstract

As a second-generation Puerto Rican poet who grew up in the projects of East New York, critics have, on the whole, tended to focus more on Martín Espada's placement within Latino writing traditions, his reclamation of "hidden" history, or his clear bent toward resistance poetics without acknowledging in any substantive way how the underlying global economic and political conditions of late capitalism (neoliberalism) have shaped his subjectivity and informed his literary responses. This dissertation will address those critical gaps by situating Espada's life and work within a sociohistorical analysis of neoliberal reforms, thus providing an entirely different perspective on both how and why we should read Espada's canon.

The central premise of this study is that Espada, born in 1957, has lived through each of the key crises of late capitalism and has crafted in his poems and prose political responses to them. For nearly thirty years, Espada has chronicled (among many events) the Chilean coup of 1973, the effects on (im)migrant labor relations during the 1980s Reagan era as well as the first war on terror in Central America, the privatization of agrarian spaces and the collapse of the commons that inspired the Zapatista uprising in the 1990s, and finally the post-9/11 climate of endless war and the decline of empire, all of which are generally acknowledged as the most recognizable flashpoints of modern global capital.

Espada's poetry about the dislocation of Puerto Ricans also offers a unique perspective on how we might extend this "brief history of neoliberalism," to use David Harvey's term, through the lens of colonialism to incorporate the earlier political and economic policies of the island as the basis for trade and labor programs that have been ostensibly exported to a variety of other geographic regions. Ultimately, a cultural study of Espada's writing that relies on neoliberal history for a contextual base enables us to understand his central political commitments to rewrite and thereby reshape the future of that history into a language of political possibility that offer, by way of pedagogy and politics, utopian and socially democratic expressions as viable alternatives to neoliberalized discourse.