

Dear Self-Respecting Puerto Ricans,

I am writing to comment on two or three points remaining yet salient, discussed or not, as a result of the panel discussion which was conducted at Taller Boricua on Thursday, March 4th, entitled “(Dis)empowerment: Addressing Controversial Subjects in Contemporary Latino Art,” on the topic of the use of the racial epithet “spic” in “Round the Way Girl,” a sculpture piece by Melissa A. Calderon.

To be sure, the conversation was quite lively. Many people from the community came out for the event and a videotape was generated as documentation. In the end, as far as I am concerned, there was no agreement to agree to disagree. The other viewpoint – that allows for the use of the word in the 21st century – is just plain stupid. Yes, I said it – it’s stupid. What? – Aren’t there enough despicable epithets out there already? Do we really need another one, or to revive a dead one, in order to further marginalize our existence? It’s like gilding a piece of shit, and topping it with a Puerto Rican flag in order to claim it and embrace it as ours.

But what I see here is even more important than that, and needs mentioning and adding to end this insidious argument. Surely, I can’t stop people from doing or saying whatever the hell they desire, nor have I any need to do so. However, as a poet, I just want to point something out to those who would say that this issue is generational; that it is a difference of opinion between the “older” generation, and the new. Well, I feel that that’s not true. I believe that what insulted my father in the 1930’s insults my son in the year 2010. Some things in life are simply intolerable as a matter of self-respect, regardless of so-called artistic trends.

When Puerto Ricans, or “other” Latinos insist on using this vile term for whatever expression they claim, the very first people that they insult, disrespect and denigrate are the thousands of Puerto Rican soldiers who paid the ultimate price for freedom with their lives, while being called spics by their racist commanding officers in battles fought on foreign shores to preserve this democracy. I’m speaking of men like Sergeant Modesto Cartagena who recently passed away at age 87, and was awarded in 1951 the Distinguished Service Cross for “extraordinary heroism” in South Korea (See: New York Times, March 04, 2010). Can Puerto Ricans today imagine the insults that these men bore in order for you to presume the entitlement or right to dishonor them now, when even their former commanders are praising them?

Another point is this: Don’t you think that it is colonially hypocritical to use the 1st Amendment of the constitution of this country to claim a right to free speech? I mean, are you talking about the constitution that also allowed for our forced nationalization into this country through the Jones Act of 1917? Are we now following the tenets of a society that has found it within its belief system to allow for the forced citizenry of a colonized people of one nation, which was ceded to the second nation after a bogus war was waged to wrestle it from them in the first place? Are we forgetting or dismissing how this so-called democratic nation imposed military bases, forced sterilization on our women on the mainland; attempted to outlaw the native language of the people; bombed the islands of Culebra and Vieques ad infinitum, killed marine life along the circumference of the islands – including endangered species, such as the Loggerhead tortoise; displace indigenous and descendants of indigenous African-Puerto Ricans; has jailed freedom fighters, and is still in violation of the U.N. charter as it pertains to aggression, imperialism and colonization in Puerto Rico? If this be so, how well, then, have we assimilated into this society that values nothing, that holds nothing sacred for the sacrifice of what it calls progress.

You proponents of reviving dead racism may think that you are slick, or intelligent, or chic or even entitled – but I say that you are not. You are just sad opportunists who would do anything to become rich and famous for 15 minutes in a society that wants you lynched (See: “Puerto Rican Obituary” and “The Spanglish National Anthem” by El Reverendo Pedro Pietri) – whereas great patriots like Don Pedro Albizu Campos did not care about fame or fortune, but dignity and integrity and what is right! “La Patria es Valor y Sacrificio,” said Campos. I ask, do you have the valor to sacrifice 15 minutes of shameless fame in order to preserve and protect our dignity?

What causes me to write and ask this is the following concern... The thing about all of this is that I believe that one of you wants to be the very first among us to represent us on national and international TV, wearing a goddamned fucking SPIC t-shirt – rhinestoned or not. Well, go ahead – and see if some self-respecting Puerto Rican, of one generation or another, doesn’t shove his or her patriotic foot up your ignorant, unimaginative and sellout ass!

Jesús Papoleto Meléndez,
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