



Gustavo Arellano's "Ask a Mexican" Column USES THE PROFANE TO CREATE, EXPAND NATIONAL CONVERSATION ON RACE AND ETHNICITY

BY DEREK OLSON

OUTSIDE SANTA ANA's Libreria Martinez bookstore, a teenage girl huddles in the crowded doorway. She stands on her tiptoes to get a look at Gustavo Arellano, who's just disappeared from the view of the sweaty, anxious crowd.

"He looks so much different," she says. "I was expecting him to be this big fat revolutionary guy."

Arellano had been signing copies of his book, "Ask A Mexican," but the 300 copies stocked for the event sold out. So he was running back to his office at the OC Weekly to get 30 from his personal stash.

Those who glimpse the author see someone a little more clean-cut than the bloated, gold-toothed bandito atop his syndicated column also called "Ask a Mexican." His book compiles some of those columns.

The character, an admitted stereotype, is just one of the many hats Arellano puts on each day. He thinks of himself first as an investigative reporter for the OC Weekly, but he's also the Orange County alternative paper's food critic. Arellano also now makes the rounds on local television and radio—as well as national appearances on CNN and The Colbert Report, among many others, and then, there's the book.

Just needed to know the reasoning behind the BLARING MARIACHI MUSIC AT 7 A.M. ON A SATURDAY MORNING. I am of Spanish descent (my father is Puerto Rican), and I wasn't raised around such BLASTING ACCORDION MUSIC when growing up. Just to add to this, my father also was a professional musician and played Latino music. So, what is it with the Mexi-tunes? Are they trying to wake up, or wake others up?

Boricua Baboso



When colleagues arrive each morning, they usually hear a disembodied Arellano in the background. He's probably again ducked under his desk to muffle his loud voice during an important interview. He has the uncanny ability to already be in when others arrive.

At 28, Arellano's early success can't be explained away by luck. Although he graduated from Chapman University, he didn't major in journalism or get a boost from some beneficent journalism professor who happened to stash an internship hook-up for the class suck up. Arellano just wrote a letter to OC Weekly and impressed former editor Will Swain so much that he was invited to freelance. Arellano's consistent and irreverent work eventually earned him a full-time gig and then a promotion to News and Investigative Editor.

Arellano also credits Swain for putting him up to doing the "Ask a Mexican" column for the first time. Like many genius moments, it came out of a deadline driven brainstorming session after a story fell through last minute.

The first and many subsequent columns weren't always well received. He was blasted from the anti-immigration front for giving a voice to Mexicans, and called a sellout by some Mexicans for playing into stereotypes.

"I get it from all sides," he says. "To me, that's just an indication that I'm doing my job. I'm an investigative reporter, so, of course, I have thick skin."

The questions he answers are sometimes blatantly racist, bizarre, and even sexual in nature, but Arellano's business is dispelling myths. And, he's ready to slaughter any sacred cows along the road.

"I've never regretted anything I've ever said. Regret is one of the worst emotions you can inflict on yourself," he says. "If you're not prepared to deal with that, then you shouldn't write."

However readers feel about him, they have overwhelmingly turned to his column each week. As journalism professors all over the country cynically inform students that newspapers don't cover

Dear Mexican: My grandparents were Dutch on one side and Irish on the other—but they came here legally, through Ellis Island. What I can't stand are a bunch of fence-hopping, river-wading illegals telling me I owe them a free education, health care and transportation. Making these people citizens simply because they're here is like letting someone keep my car just because he already stole it.

Angry Gabacho Goes Really Off

Dear AGGRO: Wake up and smell the tacos. Your letter contains enough inaccuracies, misrepresentations and logical fallacies to qualify as a quiz for high school rhetoric students. *Primeramente*, you begin by saying that immigrants don't bother you, then switch courses by bashing illegal immigrants. It's fine to distinguish between the two, but don't offer qualifiers when arguing a point—they weaken your conclusion. Also, illegal immigrants aren't demanding free anything—just amnesty for millions.

minorities for business reasons, Arellano seems to have found an audience. He's now syndicated in 22 publications including one in far-flung Jackson, Wyoming.

As he reappeared at Libreria Martinez, the crowd went into a frenzy and jockeyed to get one of the extra copies he'd brought back. Five minutes later, all were sold out again.

Will "Ask A Mexican" last? Or will it become relic of a time when Hispanic Americans were still struggling to find a voice? Either way, Arellano is ready to take his popularity in stride. He's riding the wave, but when it passes, he'll still be digging through documents and university archives.

His next big project, due out in 2008, to be published by Scribner's, is a history of Orange County.