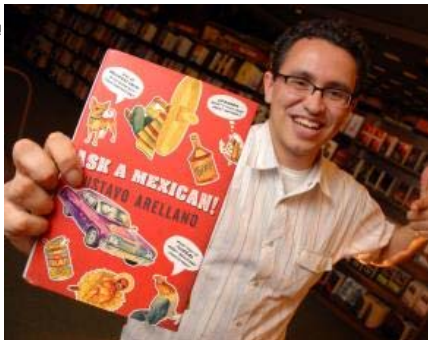




Lifestyle/Features

Gustavo Arellano came to town to promote a compilation of some of his ¡Ask a Mexican! columns.

DAVE ROSSMAN: FOR THE CHRONICLE



June 4, 2007, 1:01AM

Burning issues, picante answers

By EYDER PERALTA

Copyright 2007 Houston Chronicle

Gustavo Arellano sat down for a pupusa at a Salvadoran joint on the southwest side. He wore a short-sleeved button-front shirt, horn-rimmed glasses and Chuck Taylor sneakers befitting his calm, academic demeanor.

The 28-year-old California journalist, whose biting ¡Ask a Mexican! column attacks such hot-button issues as immigration, racism and sexism with humor and unrestrained ferocity, is hardly the imposing Chicano you might expect.

"I disappoint everyone," he explained while in town recently to promote his collection of columns and essays. "Even today, when I went to MEGA 101, I walk in, first thing (disc jockey Bo Corona) says is, 'You're not as tall as I thought you were gonna be.' "

Yet Arellano has become a flashpoint in the current immigration debate, not only for his columns but also for his multitude of TV appearances. Some say he's a liberal commie, while others cringe at his flip approach to touchy issues.

"I like to antagonize both sides," he said. "I don't want everyone to love me or hate me."

Take this column, for example:

Dear Mexican,

Why don't Mexicans have enough gratitude for America to learn to speak English? Are they too stupid? Too lazy? ...

TOOK FOUR YEARS OF SPANISH IN HIGH SCHOOL

Dear Gabacho,

The United States government shares your concerns, Took Four Years. Its Dillingham Commission released a 42-volume study on the waves of immigrants that concluded, "The new immigration as a class is far less intelligent than the old. ... Generally speaking they are actuated in coming by different ideals, for the old immigration came to be a part of the country, while the new, in a large measure, comes with the intention of profiting, in a pecuniary way, by the superior advantages of the new world and then returning to the old country." Sound familiar? That's because the Dillingham report appeared

RESOURCES

ABOUT THE BOOK

Gustavo Arellano's *¡Ask a Mexican!* (Scribner), a collection of his columns and essays, sells for \$20.

EXCERPT

Dear Mexican,

Why do Mexicans call white people gringos?

Dear gabacho,

Mexicans do not call gringos gringos. Only gringos call gringos gringos. Mexicans call gringos gabachos, which has its etymological roots in the Castilian slur for a French national and does not have anything to do with Don Gabacho, the main character in the classic 1960s Japanese puppet show *Hyokkori Hyotan-Jima (Happenings on a Gourd-Shaped Island)*. So, next time you want to look cool in front of your Mexican friends, say, "I don't want that gabacho Mexican food they make at Taco Bell"

in 1911, and the inassimilable masses at the time were eastern and northern Europeans. The Dillingham Commission proves that the time-honored conservative anecdote that earlier generations of immigrants walked off the boats, chopped down their multisyllabic surnames and learned English immediately is (nonsense). American racism is a carousel and here we are again.

In print, Arellano is loose with his pejoratives, and he writes about things Latinos might not want to talk about. He pokes fun at the teen pregnancy rate in one column; in another, he makes sly references to diabetes and alcoholism.

"I tell (readers) to view my column as a Trojan horse," he said. "Sometimes I'm going to give the opposition a little so I can come back with something much stronger."

He said he's also trying to reappropriate negative words and images the way African-Americans have done with the n-word, although at least one reader, a professor of Chicano studies at California State University at Northridge, questioned the use of the Frito Bandito-esque cartoon image that accompanies his columns.

"These racist terms and images were made for racists to use as racial slurs," wrote the professor, Gerard Meraz. "To think we have the power to change one word's or image's meaning by using it is unrealistic. ... As Audre Lorde said, 'We cannot dismantle the master's house using their tools.' "

"I wrote (Meraz) and told him, you know what, that's a perfectly legitimate point," said Arellano. "I don't know if I can do it, but I am sure as hell going to try."

Arellano's column started as a spoof after his editor at the alternative OC Weekly drove past a billboard featuring Piolín, Los Angeles' most popular DJ, cross-eyed and wearing a Viking hat. "That guy," he said, "looks like if you asked him a question about Mexicans, he could answer it."

With some space to fill one week, the two men made up a question and had Arellano answer it. Arellano's inbox was flooded with e-mails, earnestly responding to his request for questions. That was in 2004. The column now is syndicated in 24 publications nationwide, including the Houston Press, with a combined circulation of 1.4 million.

Tony Diaz, founder of the Houston literary group Nuestra Palabra, has hosted Arellano on his radio show. He said that when it comes to brown-white relations, things have reached such extremes that caricatures are often mistaken for reality.

Diaz recalled that he once pretended to be a Mexican Minuteman, full of vitriol and exaggerated traits, lobbying for tightening the border with Canada. A local television station showed up and conducted a serious interview. "It's become such a joke that satire might be the only way of touching on those issues," he said.

Race first became an issue for Arellano — the son of Mexican immigrants, one of whom entered illegally — five years before the column began. He had graduated from high school and decided to pursue film studies when he heard that a local public school trustee had proposed suing Mexico for \$50 million to refund the costs of educating children of illegal immigrants.

"Never mind that (the trustee) never explained where he came up with that number or never came up with how many students were children of illegal immigrants," said Arellano. "What pissed me off beyond belief is he was going after people like me.

"I qualified under his category," he continued. " ... I went to a really bad high school, and we had no facilities. We were all minorities, almost all immigrants. The white kids were all Romanian refugees; the black kids were kids from Ghana, Ethiopia; the Asian kids were Vietnamese or Cambodian. So for him to say (Mexican) kids are ruining it ... it, like, hit me."

Arellano went before the school board and screamed into a microphone for two minutes. It was a "political awakening" that got him interested in journalism. "I was never motivated to do anything," he recalled, "until that day."

As the column grows, Arellano works hard to remain irreverent.

He chides mainstream Latino activists for being whiny, and he prides himself on keeping his complaints "informative and humorous, in a way that's more than 'How dare you say that?' "

Yet after a reading at a westside Barnes & Noble, the appreciative standing-room crowd — mostly Latino, mostly young — had serious questions. What does Arellano think about the the proposed wall on the border? About indigenous culture? About the reasons behind the Oaxacan riots?

Inside this most mainstream of bookstores, Arellano fielded each one seriously. And another important, perhaps unanswerable, question hung in the air: What happens when the satirist becomes the pundit?

eyder.peralta@chron.com