

Hostile Humor

A scholar ponders the irreverent Mexican

Gustavo Arellano joins a long parade of ethnic American humorists who have taken on, thus taken over, the broken tongues and bent images through which their people have been mocked by the mainstream.

Arellano's "iAsk a Mexican!" echoes Finley Peter Dunne's blarney-spouting Chicago-Irish barkeep "Mr. Dooley," the pointed and poignant blackface antics of black comedian Bert Williams, Hjalmer Peterson's wandering Swedish bumpkin Olle i Skratthult (Ole from Laughtersville), the frumpy Jewish vaudevillians Weber and Fields, and many more who are rightly honored for their revelations of the many-splendored American experience.

So why all the fuss in enlightened Eugene?

Minorities in America have been wounded frequently by negative stereotypes, and many thoughtful people, whether in the minority or the majority, have opposed such stereotypes with good reason. Were a "white person" to have written "iAsk a Mexican!", they might expect to be opposed as usurpers doing what they have no right to do. But it's different when a member of the group employs these stereotypes.

"iAsk a Mexican!" uses a common comic strategy employed by various minorities in American life, going back to Irish, Jews, "Scandihoovians" and Italians in the 19th century and persisting, indeed thriving, in the present. The contemporary Northern Cheyenne performance artist Bentley Spang, for example, enacts outrageous send-ups of stereotypical American Indian "rez rockets" and "commod bods" in exhibits and videos that align with the "iAsk a Mexican!" approach.

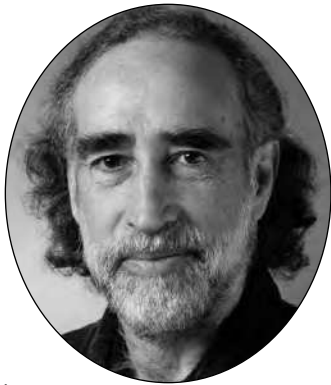
By taking control of potentially hostile humor, by turning it into comedy of their own making, humorists like Arellano point out how silly rigidly held negatives stereotypes really are.

Bentley Spang, Gustavo Arellano, and many artfully articulate members of minority groups, take "bad" out-group stereotypes head-on, poking fun at them, deflecting them, redefining them, turning them into a challenge to, or chance for dialogue with, the dominant culture. By taking control of potentially hostile humor, by turning it into comedy of their own making, humorists like Arellano point out how silly rigidly held negatives stereotypes really are. As the visionary African-American writer Ralph Ellison put it, such artists "change the joke and slip the yoke." In other words, Ask a Mexican is a humorously conveyed but nonetheless serious way to take on the very same significant cross-cultural issues addressed by the syndicated columns of Mexican Americans Roberto Rodriguez and Patricia Gonzalez.

Mysteriously, more than a few excessively educated, PC majority liberals, some of whom might even have chuckled over Martin Mull's skewering of Wonder Bread-eating white suburbanites, can't handle the radical notion of a similarly cutting Mexican-American humorist. Perhaps they're being overly paternalistic in "protecting" minorities? Perhaps they (usually wrongly) figure that less educated majority folks or children will take the humor literally? At the same time, playing with their own stereotypes by minorities is done more often behind closed cultural doors. Hence some charge Arellano with making "private" matters "public," in the same way that Alice Walker was attacked for writing about black men who beat black women in *The Color Purple*.

Their modes may differ, yet Alice Walker and Gustavo Arellano each "tell the truth" in their own way. And we need to listen and learn. Just as no ethnic group anywhere is comprised entirely of people who are unfailingly advanced and noble, neither is any group dominated by people who are perpetually degenerate and ignoble (well, maybe right-wing Republicans). That's why humorists like Arellano say, yeah, some of us like fine clothes and cars, sex, stinky food (like kim chee or lutefisk or limburger); some of us are tight-fisted, or lazy, or feisty, or drunkards, or fools, or foul-mouthed. What's the big deal? What's so strange? Our styles may not be the same on the surface, but we're all human beings, we're all Americans, we're all in this together.

James P. Leary, Ph.D., directs the Folklore Program at the University of Wisconsin, where he teaches courses on humor and comparative ethnic studies. He has written several books on regional culture and humor. He visits family and friends in Eugene often.



How to Be Happy

by Shannon Wheeler



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

STEEL ON STEEL

Thanks for the article (cover story, 1/10) favoring light rail over bus rapid transit. I have known all along that light rail makes more sense, but it was nice to see it spelled out so succinctly. There were however, a few things that the article didn't cover:

Human-caused climate change is real, and peak oil is upon us now. We must be doing everything we can to get off petroleum use. One beauty of a trolley car system is that it can operate on electricity — totally green, wind and solar generated electricity. Bus systems typically run on diesel fuel. (Some cities do have electric buses, but the approach is problematic because it is necessary to have two overhead contacts instead of one.)

Another point in favor of light rail is that steel wheels roll over steel rails in a low-friction, energy-efficient manner that the inflated rubber tires of a bus can never match. So, not only can a trolley use cleaner energy, but it can use less of it too.

In a modification of an old saying, "There's never enough money to do it right but always enough money to do it twice," bureaucrats may insist that the money just isn't there to build the (initially) more expensive light rail system so we'll have to settle for bus rapid transit, yet they've earmarked close to \$800,000,000 for new roads which climate change demands we should *not* be building at all.

Twenty years from now it will very likely be difficult to find dependable supplies of petroleum to run buses (petroleum that we shouldn't be burning anyway). Twenty years from now the economy will likely be in such a state it will be much more difficult to build a light rail system. So let's find some leadership and do it now.

Robert Bolman
Eugene

MPC SOAP OPERA

I attended the most recent meeting of the Metropolitan Policy Commission in

Springfield on Thursday (1/10). I am usually the only person there as a citizen. Everyone else attends as a member of the board, a governmental staff person, a Chamber of Commerce representative or a member of an organization, such as Friend of Eugene, 1000 Friends of Oregon or Goal One Coalition.

The meeting usually contains political drama, much like a serial soap opera. As the meeting moved along, I sat closer to the edge of my chair listening to the increasingly unbelievable interactions.

The context of the discussion was around the STIP for FY 2010-2015 to increase the funding total by \$90-\$100 million in priorities. ODOT was asking the MPC to give feedback on a list of projects — at this meeting — today and the Citizen's Advisory Committee (CAC) at their next meeting. I didn't have the list before me, but they talked about it being a couple of pages long. There were requests from various members of the MPC to have a list of priorities and objective criteria for making judgments of projects so the MPC could conduct due diligence in decision making. The expressed concern was that ODOT hadn't allowed sufficient time for the MPC to deliberate and hand down a quality decision.

The questions I asked myself were: Why is ODOT setting such a short time frame? What are they trying to cram down the MPC's throat?

Bobby Green and Anne Bellew both stated that the MPC needs to move along because this area is in competition with other areas for many other projects. A statement was also made by a staffer that the monies haven't even been allocated by the Legislature. Alan Zelenka made the cogent statement that this is an "artificial deadline for fictitious monies."

Then the conversation turned to trying to set an interim meeting to give the members time to study the list of projects and set educated priorities. At this point, Sid Leiken stated that he has a life and refused to have