Backlash

Lourdes Torres¹

Published online: 22 July 2019
© Springer Nature Limited 2019

I thought I was inured to the virulence with which people respond to ideas they disagree with on social media or in comments sections of online newspaper or magazine articles. However, the hostility generated by two recent Latino-themed stories has surprised me. One story centered on the release of the Netflix short documentary, *After Maria*. The other concerns the resolution to change the name of the iconic student organization, Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA). These recent controversies, and especially the responses to them, remind me of the importance of providing nuanced, complex representations of our communities.

In the case of the documentary *After Maria*, as of this writing, about 100,000 people have signed various circulating petitions asking Netflix to remove the film from their streaming platform (<https://www.change.org/p/netflix-remove-after-maria-from-netflix-streaming-platform>). The documentary follows the journey of three impoverished women living with their families in a hotel in the Bronx, following the destruction of their homes in Puerto Rico during Hurricane Maria. The documentary tracks their challenge to find housing and employment as the temporary financial support provided by FEMA runs out. Numerous comments in response to the petitions and on social media outlets angrily condemn the film for not telling the stories of the majority of Puerto Ricans who stayed on the island after the hurricane. Other commentators bitterly denounce what they take to be yet another portrayal of the stereotype of “lazy, welfare dependent Puerto Ricans,” which they claim do not represent them.

Meanwhile, some observers (Alejandro Carpio and Yarimar Bonilla, among others) suggest that objections to the film are grounded in classism and a disavowal of diasporic Ricans as legitimate Puerto Ricans (<http://www.80grados.net/after-after-maria/> and <https://www.elnuevodia.com/opinion/columnas/entrelafugayelaguant-e-columna-2496971/>).

They defend the telling of the story of the displaced indigent women as authentic Puerto Rican stories representative of the approximately 200,000 Puerto Ricans who sought refuge on the mainland following the hurricane. Responses to Carpio and Bonilla’s opinion pieces run the gamut from those who were moved

✉ Lourdes Torres
ltorres@depaul.edu

¹ DePaul University, Chicago, USA

to view the film again or for the first time to those who continued to insist that the documentary is an inaccurate representation of Puerto Ricans. Wading through the ugly, dehumanizing aspersions heaped on the film's three protagonists and the Puerto Rican filmmaker in these comments, what also comes through loud and clear is a deep hunger for recognition and a thirst for media representations that depict the resiliency and self-reliance of islanders who remained in Puerto Rico to reconstruct their lives while enduring months without federal or local support, electricity or running water. These folks are tired of being forgotten.

The other case that has generated a sizeable backlash is the vote of the current leadership of MEChA to change the name of the 50-year-old organization at its national meeting in March 2019. Founded in California at the height of the Chicano Movement, this prominent, activist organization has a mission to empower young people to pursue higher education through an engagement with Chicano history and culture. Currently, approximately 500 MEChA chapters can be found in universities, colleges and high schools across the United States.

When news of the resolution, supported by a vast majority of the leadership, broke, the condemnation was fierce. MEChA alumni and some current members were outraged. The uproar on social media was swift, and some chapters declared they would separate from the national organization. Responding to this outcry, MEChA's national board issued a statement explaining their decision. They noted that they had voted to replace "Chicanx" and "Aztlán" from the organization's name to be consistent with the ongoing restructuring of MEChA around a politics of inclusivity. The students argue that, although they agree with some of the historic founding principles of the organization, they are rethinking others, and they go on to state,

In the current moment we must strongly condemn White Supremacy, Anti-Blackness, Queer-antagonism, Trans*-antagonism, ableism, Anti-Indigenous Sentiment, Mexican centrism, anti-Central American sentiments, and the colonial concept of Aztlán. We must continue to evolve as a national organization in light of our ever-changing political reality in order to better serve Latinx students. (<https://remezcla.com/features/culture/mecha-national-board-statement-on-name-change/>)

One doesn't have to be a Chicano *veterano* to understand the anger, hurt, and betrayal felt by generations of Mechistas who built and nurtured the organization over the years. Some felt that the students lacked perspective and respect, and argued that they misunderstood the capacious signifiers, "Chicano" and "Aztlán." Others tagged the students as misguided assimilationists (e.g., <https://www.gustavoarellano.org/2019/04/canto-lvi-mecha-and-me/> and <http://www.pochocommunity.org/2019/04/mecha-changes-name-to-one-members-can-pronounce/0>). Meanwhile, the leadership insists that they want to develop an organization welcoming to Latino students of all varieties.

My objective is not to unpack the many dimensions of these complicated situations. If you are interested, google the stories to get a sense of the intricacies and deep emotions on all sides of these issues. Rather, I simply want to point

out that both scenarios demonstrate once again the variety of perspectives in our Latino communities and the need for engagement with standpoints with which we disagree. Also, they attest to the need for more venues like *Latino Studies* that provide a platform to debate the issues relevant to our many communities and present divergent points of view on issues of importance to Latinos in an honest but empathetic manner.

Too often in the mainstream media, we are presented as a monolithic entity—the Latino community, the Latino vote, the Latino perspective, and so on. Too often those who disagree with one particular perspective are demonized as ignorant or sellouts. In the scenarios I present here, multiple perspectives merit attention, empathy, and consideration. I am reminded of novelist Chimamanda Adichie's caution about the dangers of a single story. She states that the danger of a single story is not that it is untrue but that it is insufficient. In essence, forming opinions on the basis of a single point of view gives us incomplete, simplistic and potentially damaging understandings of complex experiences and situations.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.