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Overcoming the Pain

To say that we are in a post racial society is the same as saying “I have been living under a rock.” Race relations are tense in the United States. With the election of President Donald Trump, race has been a recurring topic that has greatly polarized Americans. Some Americans claim people are being too sensitive while others claim that people are not being sensitive enough. Some Americans contest that the past should remain in the past while others contest that history should be studied and learned. Ed Vega’s “Spanish Roulette” revolves around Sixto, a Puerto Rican poet, who seeks revenge against local gangbanger Lino for the rape of his sister Mandy. “Spanish Roulette” takes place in 1970’s New York, a time marked by large migrations of Puerto Ricans, and it explores themes of biculturalism, post racialism and masculinity. Although Sixto attempts to overcome his struggles of culture’s expectations of masculinity, he ultimately fails to do so as demonstrated through his failure to find peace in his poetry, his misogynistic perceptive of Mandy’s rape, and his drive to violently reassert his masculinity.

To commence, Sixto strives to be post racial through his poetry, but after the rape of Mandy, he abandons poetry as well as his attempt to be post racial. There have been many takes on what it means for a society to be “post racial.” “Does being post racial mean that we are past race completely, or merely that race is no longer essential to how we identify ourselves?” (Hsu 155). A post racial society is one where differences in races are recognized, but race is not an

indispensable part of a person's identity. Sixto manages to portray this post racial attitude through his poetry: "I thought I had beat it with the education and the poetry... and now this." (Vega 592). Sixto claims that through education and poetry he was able to overcome the painful history of discrimination that his people faced (Vega 591). His disassociation from the pain Puerto Ricans experienced—such as being colonized—indicates a distance from his Puerto Rican identity. When people of one's own culture are being discriminated or harmed, one feels empathetic to the pain those people are facing. So when someone is able to distance themselves from that pain, they demonstrate that they no longer closely identify with that culture. Sixto believes he overcame that pain through the outlet that is his poetry; however, after the rape of Mandy, he no longer finds refuge in poetry. Sixto's bicultural nature manifests itself in two different forms: poetry and pain. His American culture is symbolized by the poetry he writes, or, as he called it, "liberal American jive" (Vega 591). His Puerto Rican culture takes the form of pain. Because Sixto no longer alleviates his pain through education and poetry, he is no longer distancing himself from his Puerto Rican identity. "[The] pain would never leave him. Spics weren't Greeks and the word katharsis had no meaning in private tragedy" (Vega 592). Sixto seems to abandon his American identity, especially because "the pain would never leave." He further cements his allegiance to his Puerto Rican identity by referring to himself as a "Spic." The term "Spic" was used in a pejorative way by Americans to address Hispanics. By embracing this term he is also embracing the discrimination that Puerto Ricans were subjected to by Americans. He embraces the pain. Thus, Sixto abandons his post racial attitude by allying himself to his Puerto Rican identity and relinquishing the solace he found in poetry.

Furthermore, Sixto adheres to a *machista* view of virginity and rape. Male dominance is a prominent aspect of hispanic culture, and it is also exhibited in Puerto Rican culture. In a male dominated society, men are not only able to freely express their sexuality, but they are eagerly encouraged to do so. Women, on the other hand, are expected to be sexually repressive and value their virginity. Although Americans are not entirely free from this misogynistic view of women's sexuality, in Hispanic culture this view is taken far more seriously, almost religiously. By subscribing to the belief that a girl's virginity is tied with her femininity, Sixto further embraces Puerto Rican culture. "Damaged goods...In all his educated, enlightened splendor, that's how he felt. Like she had been rendered untouchable, her femaleness soiled and smeared forever" (Vega 591). Feeling anger towards Lino is not a result of cultural conditioning; it is a humane response to a tragedy inflicted on a loved one. Sixto's culture comes to play when he decides how to view the loss of his sister's virginity. Sixto finds himself in a struggle with his perceived identity and his actual feelings. On the one hand, he has this view of himself as a progressive, educated Puerto Rican American, but on the other he holds male chauvinistic views of his sister's rape—a view that is held by traditional Hispanics. By referring to his sister as "damaged," Sixto decides on the Puerto Rican cultural view of women's sexuality, which is further established by Vega's use of the term "goods." Instead of viewing his sister as a human being, she is diminished to a possession that no one wants. This misogynistic take on virginity and rape is an example of Sixto fulfilling his cultural expectations as a Puerto Rican man, thus indicating that he is not post racial.

Moreover, the threat to Sixto's masculinity impels him to seek violent retribution against Lino. Another aspect of Hispanic culture is that men be aggressive. If a man is expected to

behave aggressively under normal conditions, then when he is wronged, he should express fury that can only be matched by God himself. Additionally, Latin men are supposed to be possessive and territorial; therefore, a person can only truly be a man if he manages to protect his family members, especially the “helpless” women. Women are property, an appendage of the male family members. If a man cannot defend their women, then the man cannot defend himself. Sixto claimed that “it wasn’t so much that his sister had been wronged... The injury came from not retaliating” (Vega 539). Since Mandy is Sixto's sister, Lino's assault against Mandy was an assault against Sixto. In other words, Sixto was the one wronged by Lino's rape of Mandy. In viewing the rape as a jab to his masculinity, Sixto demonstrates how he endorses the Puerto Rican views on manhood. Sixto, however, does not fully commit to the expectations of his culture because he fails to retaliate against Lino, and thus fails to uphold his masculinity. That is the “injury” that Sixto refers to: the failure to fit the Hispanic norms of masculinity as a result of his indecisiveness. If he were truly a “man,” he would not hesitate to take revenge and restore his family’s honor. This hesitation is a direct result of Sixto’s struggle with his identity, and it is this constant battle he has with his identity that seizes the focus from the actual rape victim. As stated by Mark Lilla, identity politics make people “narcissistically unaware of conditions outside their self-defined groups.” In the case of “Spanish Roulette,” Sixto’s fixation on his identity blinds him of his sister’s experience. At no point in the story does Sixto consider what Mandy wants or what she needs. Instead, Sixto’s primary concern is that he risks his honor and his manhood by not pursuing revenge. Because of the ambiguous ending, it is unclear which identity Sixto chose. But even if he did not kill Lino, Sixto displays many Puerto Rican notions of masculinity and is therefore not beyond his cultural expectations.

Vega makes good use of other characters to further differentiate the type of male identities Sixto must choose to embody. Willie represents the Puerto Rican American masculinity, and, much like Sixto, he is educated, caring, and reasonable. Throughout “Spanish Roulette” Willie proves to be a helpful and empathetic friend to Sixto. Lino, on the other hand, represents the extreme variant of Puerto Rican *machismo*. He deals heroin and is a member of the “crazy,” local gang (Vega 589). Sixto’s father represents the average Puerto Rican *machista* who holds “jibaro” values (Vega 593). Jibaro, or peasant farmers, are characterized by their poverty, illiteracy, male pride, honor and fondness of their community. One of the most discernible traits of a jibaro is that he is self-sufficient. This need to be self-sufficient could possibly be one of the reasons why Sixto does not reach out to the police; however, the 1970’s were a time marked by heavy racial profiling committed by the police, which could also explain Sixto’s silence. In the 1970’s there was an influx of Puerto Ricans arriving into the United States, and Americans often viewed these immigrants as inferior. They viewed Puerto Ricans, and descendants of Puerto Ricans, as violent machistas, rapists, and gangbangers. These stereotypical views of Puerto Ricans were also held by the police—authority figures who have the power to arrest and kill people. This poses a limit to Sixto’s attempts to become post-racial. No matter how much he tries to be a Willie archetype, Americans will very often view him as a Lino archetype. In other words, no matter how poetic and educated Sixto strives to be, no matter how much Sixto tries to embody the Puerto Rican American identity, Americans in the 1970’s often viewed him as a violent, uneducated Puerto Rican. That is to say, Sixto could never disassociate himself from his Puerto Rican identity nor will his American identity be recognized.

It is hard to “get over” the bitter history of one’s own culture, especially if one is part of a minority. Black Lives Matter, the Dakota Access Pipeline Protest, and the Women’s March are all movements in response to the continuous injustices committed against minority groups. These groups of people strive to subvert the status quo on sexuality and gender, they try to educate us on cultural appropriation and they attempt to improve conditions for minority groups. In response to the growing awareness of what is offensive and what causes disadvantages, there have been many reactionary groups who feel that political correctness has gone too far. The white supremacist rally in Charlottesville is an extreme example of a reactionary group that feels “disadvantaged” and “marginalized” despite being “loaded socioeconomically” (Hsu 153). The group in the Charlottesville rally was largely composed of white men, people who hold great institutional power in the United States. People like these men feel like there “should be no more complaining from black folk;” they feel that since there have been so many rights given to minority groups, there is no need for improvement (Reid 59). There is, however, much room for improvement. News anchors wear tacos for Cinco de Mayo, the police notoriously shoot black people, and our President prefers immigrants from white nations. Therefore, it is difficult to overcome the pain that your people faced if your people continue to face those same painful experiences. And like Sixto, many Americans strive to be post-racial, but cannot do so given the hateful conditions they are subjected to.