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## Zealous Words

N\*W\*C takes on racism via the humorous vision of three Los Angeles natives

Interview By LAURA LEFFLER JAMES

I'm panicky about writing this article. Even after talking to (i.e., giggling and guffawing with) the guys behind *N\*W\*C: The Race Show* as they share their personal histories, motivations and hopes for their play, I have reservations -- at least when it comes to spelling out the acronym its creators have used since the play's inception in 2003.

The three guys -- Allan Axibal, Miles Gregley and Rafael Agustin -- each from a different culture in Los Angeles, came together in college to write a play about race. That's been done before, of course, but the trio didn't write a story lamenting the woes of racism; instead, they stripped down racism to expose its inherent ridiculousness.

As Axibal, Gregley and Agustin would have me do, I am coming out with it -- their play's name, that is. *N\*W\*C* stands for "Nigger Wetback Chink," three monstrous words when heard in daily life, words that conjure images of harassment, political controversy and violence. They're words neither my readers nor I would likely say or want said.

According to the trio, that's the point: We've all heard the words, and we know the meanings. For these guys, it's time to figure out where their specious power comes from.

Axibal, 23, was born in the Philippines and moved to Los Angeles when he was 4 years old. It didn't matter to his classmates what country he came from, however -- the consistent denunciation was "chink."

Axibal remembers not understanding what the word was about, or even that it was an insult, until much later. He grew up "trying to reconcile East and West, as most Asian-Americans do," he says. Though he grew up in California, his ties to the Philippines are unyielding, and to merge such disparate cultures into a separate self is about as difficult as a thing can be.



Photo By Carol Petersen

(L-R) Allan Axibal, Miles Gregley and Rafael Agustin are the creative forces behind *N\*W\*C: The Race Show*, onstage at the Aronoff Center's Jarson-Kaplan Theater Friday and Saturday.

Gregley, 25, was born and raised in Los Angeles. Talking to Tavis Smiley on NPR, he remembers the first time dealing with the word "nigger," in the seventh grade, reading *Huckleberry Finn*: "And being the only African-American male in my class, we actually get to the 'N' word. ... So the first time we hit that word, we were reading it and everybody stops and looks at me. And I'm like, 'What's going on?' ... I don't know what the big deal is, but everybody and the teacher's like, 'Miles, is it OK if we say that?' And I'm like, 'Yeah, I don't understand the big deal.' But after that day, you know, I kind of realized ... they've already assumed that's me. And that's what really hit me -- my closest friend was looking at me like that."

At 8 years old, Agustin, now 25, came to California from Ecuador, illegally. Being called "wetback" or hearing the word on television or the radio would hit him pretty hard. But it wasn't until high school that he knew he came to the U.S. illegally. By then he had been elected class president, was a popular, smart kid and now had to integrate an unknown past into his current life.

The trio knows a bit about race relations and riots, coming from Los Angeles. When asked if they know about Cincinnati's problems, Agustin jumps in.

"We've done our homework," he says. "These are touchy issues. We think Cincinnati is ready to dialogue."

They're right, and in fact the Cincinnati Arts Association ("brave souls," says Agustin) is bringing *N\*W\*C* here, hoping that the racism conversation will start over -- this time with humor.

The words are essential to the issue. They have taken on a unique power.

"Of course it's about desensitizing the words, taking them back as ours, but that doesn't mean we want them to be used willy-nilly," Axibal says. "It's about having a mature conversation."

In the past, *N\*W\*C* has advertised using only the three words on giant billboards. Not surprisingly, such efforts have been met with indignation.

"No one knows what to expect," Agustin says. "We make the words ridiculously huge."

People have scratched out the word nigger ("As if wetback and chink are acceptable," Agustin jokes) or written "HONKEY HONKEY HONKEY" over all three. Groups of people come to protest the show without knowing anything about it.

"We may be the only people ever to have pushed the NAACP and neo-Nazis to protest on the same side," laughs Gregley.

In the end, though, many people who come to protest wind up staying, watching the show and going home wearing *N\*W\*C* T-shirts.

The play starts out attacking racist stereotypes, breaking them down in order to move on to the core issues.

"Expect a little bit of everything -- drama, jokes, slam poetry, all-generational media," Axibal says.

"Minus movies!" Agustin shouts.

*N\*W\*C* will be performed just twice (7:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday) at the Aronoff Center for the Arts, but the trio will also be at the Contemporary Arts Center (7:30 p.m. Thursday) and at UC's MainStreet Cinema (noon Friday) to present the preview event, "Ethnic Identity and Voice in *N\*W\*C: The Race Show*." (Both preview events are free and open to the public.)

The audience at *The Race Show* should be diverse, according to Gregley. *N\*W\*C* has had huge turnouts from California to Cleveland.

"College students, international students, people who come to the theater often, kids who've never been," Gregley says. "But really just one human race coming together. It's a play for our generation. (It allows) different cultures to come together and laugh and build a relationship together. Comedy is our attack."

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***N\*W\*C: THE RACE SHOW* is performed Friday and Saturday at the Aronoff Center's Jarson-Kaplan Theater downtown.**