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My First Lesson in Puertorriqueñidad

“You fucken spic! Whatcha hafta hit me for?” The words cut into my soul with the precision of a scalpel cutting out a tumor. Ralph Bearden, my eighth-grade companion, had just taught me my first lesson in my Puerto Rican identity.

We were playing football, a game I had never played in my rural home in Barrio Quemados, in the town of San Lorenzo, in my homeland of Puerto Rico. I had stopped the pass intended for Ralph. After jumping up and blocking it, I had crashed into him, and both of us had come walloping to the ground. We were playing in an area in front of the Roman Catholic Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul at 18th and the Parkway. It was the closest my friends and I had to a playground.

“Olvídate, José, él es un bobo,” my friends kept telling me to console me. (“Forget it, José; he’s just a dummy.”) In the meantime, Ralph’s friends were holding him back from attacking me. “Yo, Ralph, it was an accident, man. He didn’t mean to hitcha,” I heard someone say. Ralph had already landed a solid punch to my small-frame chest. My friends had pulled me aside before I could retort with an equally physical answer. The game resumed, we lost, and it ended. None of that mattered to me. The injury was done; I was a changed person.

From then on, I never played any sport with white boys, never developed close friendships with any of them. Once we walked north of 18th and Carlton Streets, we entered **nuestro barrio**. **Ahí estábamos en casa**. No **blancos** there; just us. I made sure that no white boys ever visited me **en casa**. On the street, I would mumble a “Hi” or other passing comment to them, but that was the extent of it. They didn’t visit me; I didn’t visit them. I knew my parents would welcome anyone I brought home. However, I also knew that their parents wouldn’t welcome me, a **spic**, into their homes. I had learned that they viewed me as different, supposedly inferior, a contagion to be avoided. I contributed to their boys’ health. By avoiding them, I did not infect them.

I also learned to avoid the word **spic** or **spik**, in every way possible. In lectures and writings, formal speeches, and all conversations ever since, I have never used words like “perspicacity,” “conspicuous,” or any of their derivatives. Take a good look at those words: the word **spic** is in the middle of all of them.