Arts & Humanities

A New Type of Social Currency

Valor y Cambio encourages Puerto Ricans to share their personal stories.

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“What do you value the most?” reads the prompt on the screen.

“My family,” says a middle-aged Puerto Rican man, speaking into a video recorder that’s attached to a special ATM in the lobby of El Museo del Barrio in East Harlem. After answering a few questions about what he thinks could be done to improve his community, he receives a handful of colorful bills that are accepted at select local establishments, including cafés, theaters, and museums.

This refurbished ATM, and the alternative currency it dispenses, is part of an interactive art project called Valor y Cambio (Value and Change) that Frances Negrón-Muntaner, a Columbia professor of English and comparative literature, launched in Puerto Rico in February 2019. Negrón-Muntaner, who is best known as a cultural critic and documentary filmmaker, has hauled her uniquely inquisitive three-hundred-pound cash machine to more than twenty locations on the island and around New York City, distributing “pesos of Puerto Rico” to nearly three thousand people in exchange for their stories and views.

“The goal is to get people talking about what they value in their communities, about what changes they’d like to see occur, and about how they might contribute to those changes,” says Negrón-Muntaner, who was born and raised in San Juan.

The bills are certainly conversation starters. Designed by the artist Sarabel Santos-Negrón in collaboration with Negrón-Muntaner (the two are not related), they feature portraits of Puerto Rican historical figures known for promoting social justice — like abolitionist physician Ramón Emeterio Betances and feminist labor organizer Luisa Capetillo.

“Businesses have been eager to participate,” says Negrón-Muntaner. Convincing people to spend the pesos is another matter. “Many people seem to value them too much as art objects, or for what they consider to be their cultural or political significance, to part with them.”



An alternative currency created by Columbia professor Frances Negrón-Muntaner is exchanged in Humacao, Puerto Rico. (Frances Negrón-Muntaner)

Valor y Cambio was inspired, Negrón-Muntaner says, by the ingenuity of people in many impoverished parts of the world who, having little access to official currencies, create their own bills to be exchanged for food, child care, and other essentials. She hopes that by demonstrating how alternative currencies can work, Valor y Cambio will cause people to see the untapped potential of the sharing economy in their own

communities.

“This is especially important right now in Puerto Rico, where people are suddenly demanding more of their government and social institutions,” says Negrón-Muntaner. Puerto Ricans’ heightened sense of political awareness is exemplified, she says, by the mass protests that forced the resignation of former governor Ricardo Rosselló.

To amplify the voices of those who have participated in Valor y Cambio, Negrón-Muntaner plans to showcase the ATM testimonials in a series of art exhibitions in San Juan and New York City, in an academic report, and in a documentary film.

“There are so many stories that people have shared with us about their values and their visions for the future, and we want to tell as many of them as we can,” she says.

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