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The Original Latino Gangsta or How Hollywood Created the Urban Jungle

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ABSTRACT

This essay will analyze Hollywood's imagined and violent Latino communities of the Lower East Side and the South Bronx as envisioned in films featuring Nuyorican poet, actor, and playwright, Miguel Piñero. Short Eyes (1977), Times Square (1980), Fort Apache The Bronx (1981), Alphabet City (1984) and Almost You (1986) all featured Piñero, who in the 1970s and 1980s served as Hollywood's "stand-in" representation of the poverty stricken, criminally minded Latino "other," responsible for the decay of once prosperous neighborhoods and the necessity for "white suburban flight." Piñero's legendary drug abuse and criminal activity conflicted with his successful acting and playwriting career and helped to define a generation of "Nuyorican gangstas" in film and

television. The iconic persona of Piñero eclipses each of his roles; a "Grindhouse" representation carefully controlled by Piñero in what can now be viewed as Latinized self-branding. To experience performances by Piñero is to recall a history of manipulation, both by Hollywood and ironically, by Piñero himself. However, to deconstruct the chronology of his work is to stand witness to the eventual theft of his own voice, substituted by the cultural piracy of his self-made brand and later promoted by Hollywood packaged representations of urban Latinidad.

PAROLE CHIAVE: *Miguel Piñero, Lin-Manuel Miranda, Latina/o/x, Grindhouse*

AUTORE

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The radical gentrification of New York City, a three-decade emergency for displaced Latinos of once heavily dominated barrios, continues to serve as a rallying cry for Nuyorican artists. Situated as the last bastions of urban *Latinidad*, the Bronx and the Lower East Side of Manhattan have long been dramatized as both post-apocalyptic wasteland and cultural signifier of Latinized *communitas*. Scholar Dana Farrington has noted that "In the raging 1970s, New York City was dangerous, broke and at times on fire" while scholar Frances Negrón-Muntañer has described the city as a place where Latinos needed to "own and occupy the street." What I have come to call the "Scarface Myth," based on the popular Brian DePalma/Al Pacino film, allows for a media enhanced implosion of chaos and violence amongst Latinos prompted by perceived images in popular media and culture. Hyper-masculine men selling drugs, owning women, living hard, and dying young are sold to the mass market consumer as Latino *normal*. Since the 1950s, Latino neighborhoods in New York City have become the stuff of movie, television, and live-theatrical attack; often-times, by minority writers themselves, attempting to cash in on the concept of this perceived urban, apocalyptic wasteland. In short, the closer your claim to the "ghetto," or the "block" as heralded by Jennifer Lopez, the more *authentically* Latino you are perceived.

The late Miguel Piñero remains one of the most iconic Nuyorican artists to ever participate in Hollywood films, television shows, and New York theatrical performances. During the 1970s and 80s, Piñero became synonymous with the image of the "outlaw" hustler quick to portray film roles as pusher, pimp, and junkie. His legendary career was explored in the 2001 film *Piñero*, directed by Cuban filmmaker Leon Ichaso and starred mainstream actor Benjamin Bratt. Towering at 6'3" tall, Bratt seemed an odd choice for the diminutive 5'3" Piñero, but as is the case with this study, filmic reality is not all its *cut-out-to-be* when representing the urban Latina/o landscape of the Grindhouse era in film. This falsified notion of the urban Latino jungle as featured in cinema serves as representative fact for most film viewers, and unfortunately, scholars who have deemed Hollywood's racist stereotype of *Latinidad* as truth.

In analyzing Latino representation in Grindhouse films, especially those featuring the New York City neighborhoods of the Lower East Side (*Loisaida*), East (*Spanish*) Harlem, and the often filmed South Bronx (*the Boogie Down*), audiences must be made aware of the politics of *mis*-representation present in depictions of Puerto Ricans, and of the "urban blight/white flight" of the 1950s-1970s. The complexities of the relationship between the U.S. mainland and the commonwealth of Puerto Rico, and the fact Nuyoricans are born American citizens, becomes problematic for most film and television audiences, noting that this paradoxical American citizenship does not guarantee Latinos entrance to the *American* way of life.

Latino Studies expert Juan Flores acknowledged the issue of cultural representation and “imagined” Latino communities by stipulating that

Most savvy commentators now disavow (at least explicitly) the notion of an essential Latino identity – after all, by now we know that even gender and national identities are not ‘essential’ (there is no defining female “soul” or inherent American “spirit”) – even though those same commentators often follow up by sneaking in suspiciously “essentialist” – sounding statements about Latino identity through the back door, in the guise of comments on “Latino culture.” *But that does not mean that Latino identity doesn’t exist*, for, as is frequently pointed out, social constructs still exist and can exert a strong force. Perhaps a better question would be, Is there such a thing as a collective, pan-ethnic Latino identity – one that Latinos themselves generally recognize?¹

Thus, Jon Rossini’s description of Miguel Piñero as an “organic intellectual” complicates the reception of his performances by audiences who find it difficult to separate the man from the character(s) he plays in film and television. The iconic persona of the man eclipses each of his roles, oftentimes carefully controlled by Piñero himself, for both economic and creative reasons; in what can now be viewed as an early example of Latino “self-branding.” To experience Piñero’s performances is to recall a history of manipulation, both by Hollywood and ironically, by the man himself. To deconstruct the chronology of his work is to stand witness to the eventual theft of his own voice; leaving behind a “cultural piracy” promoted by Hollywood’s stereotypical representation of Latinidad.

In analyzing Flores’s notion of *imagined* communities of both Loisaida (Lower East Side) and the South Bronx, as envisioned in films featuring the Nuyorican poet, actor, and playwright, audiences must note the politics of representation present in depictions of Nuyoricans in the 1970s. Hollywood films including *Fort Apache The Bronx* (1980), *Times Square* (1980), *Deal of The Century* (1983), *Breathless* (1983), *Alphabet City* (1984) and *Almost You* (1986) all featured Piñero, who in the 1970s and 1980s served as Hollywood’s often utilized symbol for the poverty stricken, criminally minded Latin other, responsible for the decay of once prosperous neighborhoods and the necessity for New York City’s white suburban exodus. Piñero’s legendary drug abuse and criminal activity conflicted with his successful acting and playwriting career and further helped to define a generation of “ONGs” or Old School Nuyorican *Gangstas* in Hollywood. His participation in these films, as well as his guest appearances in gritty urban crime dramas including *Kojak*, *Colombo*, *The*

¹ M. CAMINERO-SANTANGELO, *On Latinidad: U.S. Latino Literature and the Construction of Ethnicity*, University Press of Florida, Gainesville 2007.

Equalizer, and *Miami Vice*, promoted the stereotyping of Latinos as derelict, immoral, and inhuman.

Piñero, as one of the founding members of the Nuyorican Poet's Café is syncretized with its cultural aesthetics and history. Fellow founder Miguel Algarín decried the poetics of the Nuyorican Movement in art and performance as a state of mind or metaphysics of being. This concept of the term Nuyorican as an “originally Puerto Rican epithet for those of Puerto Rican heritage born in New York; [whose] Spanish was different, their way of dress different... a stateless people” remains to this day as a self-defining mantra for young black and brown Latino artists throughout the world. To this end, plays and screenplays including *Short Eyes* by Piñero or *Cuba and His Teddy Bear* by protégé Reinaldo Povod, while dramatizing a specific Nuyorican experience, must also function as mass consumption of a “universal” or pan-ethnic culture, if the goal is mainstream success in film and theatre. The seminal play *Short Eyes*, originally developed by Piñero while in prison and a member of The Family Support Initiative, depicts both a specific experience of “imprisoned” Latinidad while simultaneously serving as a morality lesson dramatizing the fraught American penitentiary system.

These archetypal “streetwise” plays often led to Hollywood film representations of Latinos as drug dealers, pimps, junkies, and prostitutes is further complicated by the writing of non-Latino screenwriters and playwrights who created Latino characters closer to “minstrelsy” than realism. This trend has once again begun to infiltrate the collective conscious of American theatergoers, causing what I believe has become a revival of the “*Latin-ploitation*” films of the 1970s in the work of Quentin Tarantino, Robert Rodriguez, and Baz Luhrmann. As Edna Acosta-Belén notes “The concepts of ‘street’ or ‘outlaw’ poetry were frequently used... to describe an artistic movement that came from the margins to denounce the racism and inequalities of US society, and give a voice to the experiences of Puerto Ricans born or raised in the barrios of New York”.² These narratives have recently been re-appropriated by hip hop artists, television shows, and video games which downplay the violent nature of crime and drugs in minority communities. Acosta-Belén’s analysis extends to media entertainments which “document the trials and tribulations of mostly working-class families struggling to survive in a racist and alienating environment”.³ For economic as well as political reasons, deified Anglo producers icons including Joe Papp sought scripts which contained hard-edged Latinidad, as exemplified by his financial backing of works by Miguel Piñero and his protégé, Reinaldo Povod.

² E. ACOSTA-BELÉN, *Latina/o Cultural Expressions: A View of US Society Through the Eyes of the Subaltern*, in *A Companion to Latina/o Studies*, Juan Flores and Renato Rosado, Blackwell Publishing, Malden 2007, pp. 72-88.

³ *Ibid.*

Screen and playwright Reinaldo Povod took great advantage of the media-enhanced negative perception of his Nuyorican identity prior to his death from AIDS complications at the age of 34. His characters in *La Puta Vida Trilogy*, in turn, featured an Oedipally obsessed narrator named Papo, two pubescent pretty boys with an edge towards hustling older men, a proud pedophile named Chino, and a dysfunctional mother and son duo who enjoy simulating sex acts and participating in pay-for-stripping sessions. As Frank Rich railed in his 1987 New York Times review, "It isn't as easy as it once was for white middle-class theatergoers to get a quick fix of guilt, so there may well be a crying need for *La Puta Vida Trilogy*." Reinaldo Povod's night of short plays and eventual screenplay which was produced at the famed Public Theater in New York City, served as a disappointing sequel to Povod's initial success with *Cuba and his Teddy Bear* starring Robert DeNiro, Ralph Macchio, and Burt Young – three Italian-American actors portraying three criminal Latinos on the Lower East Side. Within the narrative structure of *La Puta Vida Trilogy*, Povod attempts to commercially brand the memory of the Nuyorican Poet's Movement by utilizing the "outlaw" style of his mentor and rumored lover, Miguel Piñero. In Povod's theatre, the Latino character is commodified, or made to fit in as an exotic fetishized Latino object or, to use the terminology of Augusto Laó-Montes, *Latinized*.

Povod recounted the importance of this teacher/mentor relationship when noting "Like I was told by Mikey [Piñero], I have a short attention span so I have to do things in the heat of the moment. I write in 20-hour spurts sometimes, but now that I'm getting old, I can only write for four." Interviewer Kristina Johnson adds "If Povod feels like Father Time, it may be because he's come an unusually long way in his 26 years, evolving from New York street kid to Broadway playwright".⁴ Here Povod, much like Piñero, is reconstructed as an outlaw persona who authenticates his status as Nuyorican poet, hustler, and criminal. Povod continued, "I am abrasive in making suggestions... I come off like a foghorn and it turns people off. But once they let it sink in, they know I'm right." Leon Ichaso, director of the biopic *Piñero* explains that "the relationship between Povod and Piñero is like the relationship of the young and old pimp in [Piñero's] play, *The Sun Always Shines for the Cool*. The young pimp is the new kid in town, Povod, and the old pimp is Piñero, who somehow accepts that he's no longer [the man]".⁵ Therefore, in the articulation of Latina/o "normal", the players, which include characters, actors, and writers, must be born of a historical lineage which contains the DNA of stereotypical dysfunctionality and criminality. I propose that mainstream artistic and commercial success for Latina/o

⁴ L. GELLER, *Leon Ichaso*, <http://bombmagazine.org/article/2447/leon-ichaso> (accessed 23 June 2020).

⁵ *Ibid.*

writers is dependent on a perceived dysfunctional disruption of the functioning Latino family, which enacts a guilt-ridden, white man's burden for Anglo mainstream audiences.

In *Latin Numbers: Playing Latino in Twentieth-Century U.S Popular Performance*, Brian Herrera posits that "For the last 50 years, U.S. Latina/o dramatists and performers have executed the stereotype. They have enacted the stereotype so that they might eviscerate the stereotype, even as they ready themselves to – ultimately, inevitably – entomb the stereotype as an effigy of cultural memory... Within Latina/o performance, each act of the stereotype's execution – enacting, eviscerating, entombing – is a political and politicizing gesture that signals the most distinctive and important contributions of Latina/o performances in the last half century".⁶ To this end, Papo's prologue in *La Puta Vida Trilogy*'s screenplay exclaims

I wanna give you all something. (*Takes a knife out.*) Awright, nobody move. Gimme all yer money! (*Pause*) This is not what I wanna give you. (*As he folds knife and puts it back in his pocket.*) I didn't want to let those of you out there who were expectin' something like this from me – I didn't wanna let yous down. (*Long pause.*) I don't know anymore. It makes me angry sometimes. Stereotypes. Us. And other times it makes me proud. Yeah, we're bad. We're surviving the ghettos. Not many can.

To further demonstrate this Anglo perception of the Latino criminal other, *The Christian Science Monitor*'s John Beaufort's bigoted review of Povid's work states that "*This Bitch of a Life*, as the overall English title, [are] three new playlets at LuEsther Hall [which] present existence among New York Hispanics at its most dire, depressing, and depraved".⁷ To say that Povod's *La Puta Vida Trilogy* enacts, and re-enacts, Nuyorican stereotypes of the 1970s and 80s, played directly for Anglo, guilt-ridden audiences, would be an understatement.

Though the list is unfortunately too long to mention, I believe that *Fort Apache The Bronx* is arguably the best example of "South Bronx tenement cinema vérité" of the 1970s and 80s. The film, which featured Miguel Piñero as a homicidal drug dealer and a Bronx born Irish cop named Murphy, portrayed by ultra-left leaning Paul Newman is positioned to save "*them*" from each other, provides a successful Hollywood *mis*-representation of Puerto Ricans at the height of the Grindhouse era in *Latin-ploitation*. Piñero's work as an "organic intellectual" whose sensibilities and political projects arose directly from the circumstances that developed his con-

⁶ B.E. HERRERA, *Latin Numbers: Playing Latino in Twentieth-Century U.S. Popular Performance*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor 2015, p. 139.

⁷ J. BEAUFORT, *Three short works from a prize-winning playwright*, in «Christian Science Monitor», December 7, 1987.

sciousness allowed Hollywood producers to “displace the dangerous representational practice of reading ethnic cultural production as... merely autobiographical, or slice-of-life from the spaces [Piñero] inhabited”.⁸ A further example of this socio-logical reproduction is depicted in his final film, 1986’s *Almost You*, where Piñero plays Ralphie, a Puerto Rican supervisor responsible for the day to day running of a Jewish owned company dress factory. In his first scene, Ralphie greets his boss Alex, played by Griffin Dunne, with the news of an impending staff meeting with his employer-uncles.

Piñero: Mirá Alex! Tengo un problema.

Dunne: English Ralphie, speak English!

Piñero: That is English!

Dunne: (*to Spanish speaking factory women*) Hey you two! Remember this is America, goddamnit! English! Ralphie, come on. (*Salsa music plays in background*)

As in most films of this era which featured Puerto Ricans, and a constant soundtrack to Piñero’s filmic entrances and exits, *salsa music* introduces Ralphie throughout the film, establishing him as what scholar Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez calls the “Latin foreign other.” towards the end of *Almost You*, Alex chooses Ralphie to take over management of the entire company. Once Alex tells his Uncle that he has chosen Piñero to replace him, his Uncle demands “Who?” Alex replies, “Our Ralph.” This dumbfounds Uncle Stu, who responds “Our Ralph?” and makes a gesture referring to a short person, and then replies “But he’s just a ... ” This unspoken depiction of Ralphie’s ethnicity, and his perception as being unable to handle the responsibility of such an important job, provides the audience with the standard reception of Puerto Ricans in the Hollywood representative workplace as lazy, uneducated, and unworthy. However, this “saintly” Ralphie character, Piñero’s last, is in great contrast to his earlier film roles, which cemented his reputation as Hollywood’s leading stereotypical Latino criminal and established him as the signifier of violent Latin criminal in the newly decaying, post-*West Side Story* urban jungle.

The concept of “lumping” Latinos as criminalized bodies in media is articulated by STARZ television showrunner Cándido Tirado in his essay, “On Nuyorican Theatre” which defines lumping as the process “When the white American tries to combine all those people who come from different countries into one group, hence, creating the new identit... *lumping* is a clean and effective way where the Anglos can

⁸ J. ROSSINI, *Contemporary Latina/o Theater: Wrighting Ethnicity*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale 2008, p. 30.

put us in a nicely packaged box".⁹ Here, Tirado stresses the importance of self-produced work in lieu of accepting economic funds from mainstream Hollywood producers. In other words, by seizing the monetary mode of production, minority artists can avoid being "lumped" in with groups who may write from differing histories, sociologies, and languages.

In 1983's *Breathless*, Piñero portrays what might read as a Chicano criminal in the East L.A. barrio, playing opposite Richard Gere. Piñero once again performs his standard "branded outlaw" work, fencing materials for the more intelligent Anglo criminal played by Gere and serving as a conduit to a network of equally shady, brown-skinned criminals. Towards the middle of the film, Piñero's character performs a quick salsa dance with Gere's foreign, yet white-immigrant girlfriend, who when pulled away by a bothered Gere comments, "Wait, I forgot my taco!" and quickly rushes back to her table to retrieve it while Piñero looks on. *Breathless*, a major studio release, denigrates the domestic Latino, Piñero, while elevating the foreign Francophone, Valerie Kaprisky, who is portrayed as a brilliant international student of architecture. Further, as is the case with most Piñero films, he is granted a "one-and-out" scene and is only "heard" later in the film via telephone voiceover.

In 1983's *Deal of the Century*, Piñero portrays a South American guerilla soldier in need of military hardware. In the film, Piñero is a freedom fighter (terrorist) who speaks inarticulate Spanish and is responsible for misunderstanding the English directives of lead actor Chevy Chase; a mistake which leads to Piñero's unnamed character's death within the first fifteen minutes of the film. Tellingly, Piñero is killed – not fighting for the independence of his country, but rather, after stealing Chase's suitcase filled with cash. After Chase captures him, Piñero is called a "little bastard" and shot in the back as a precursor to the rest of the film – which I must stress, is a comedy. *Deal of the Century*, a Reagan era film, supports the notion of his administration's abuse of voiceless Latin Americans and their self-destruction based on the Reagan/Bush/Haig/Kissinger American ideologies of military might and justice. As cultural historian Benedict Anderson notes, nationalism has always imagined the nation as a horizontal brotherhood while Caribbean emigrants are always depicted at the mercy of strangers. Since Piñero's slight stature is lampooned in the film, as he is hoisted up by a colleague to see through the telescopic lens of a missile launcher, the Anglo audience can immerse itself in the buffoonish depiction of Latinos within the Hollywood spectrum of the early 1980s.

However, no single film would do more to demonize Latinos than 1980's *Fort Apache The Bronx*. In his most memorable performance, Piñero plays a (finally named) drug dealing hustler named Hernando who is responsible for the overdose

⁹ CÁNDIDO TIRADO, *On Nuyorican Theatre*, in Boletín del Archivo Nacional de Teatro y Cine del Ateneo Puertorriqueño, Roberto Ramos-Perea, Ateneo Press, San Juan P.R. 2007, pp. 334.

of the film's lead actress, Rachel Ticotín, and the violent hostage takeover of the fictional institution Jefferson Hospital (a stand-in for the infamous South Bronx publicly-funded, Lincoln Hospital). The hospital services the Puerto Rican community which is described by departing Police Chief Dugan as a place where Puerto Ricans are "living on top of each other... like cockroaches." *Fort Apache* was a pivotal moment in the history of Hollywood's representation of Latinos in New York as protestors took to the streets of the South Bronx and shut down production on multiple occasions. Storyboarded scenes were re-located to evening or interior shots since protestors searched areas where film crews seemed to be congregating. The call to arms by the Nuyorican community eventually led 20th Century Fox to superimpose an opening credit to the film that read as follows:

The picture you are about to see is a portrayal of the lives of two policemen working out of a precinct in the South Bronx, New York. Because the story involves police work it does not deal with the law abiding members of the community nor does it dramatize the efforts of the individuals and groups who are struggling to turn the Bronx around.

Those protestors who took to the street were adamant about controlling their image and its dissemination through Hollywood's mass-produced cultural machine. However, by casting Miguel Piñero in such a prominent role, producers found that they were able to rely on his "organic" method to capture their re-telling of the burning of the South Bronx. As Jon Rossini notes, "In the early 1970s, reviewers often invoked adjectives such as raw, immediate, and documentary to describe [Piñero's] work".¹⁰ Thus Piñero's casting led to the documentary style of this big-budget film, turning viewers into voyeurs. In "Excluding Miguel Piñero's Gritty Realistic *Short Eyes*, there is no Puerto Rican Dramatic Tradition," James MacKillop delineates the power of the Latino community in arguing for a new Hollywood depiction of Latinos within the confines of their own South Bronx community during *Fort Apache*'s preliminary filming. He notes a neighborhood protest poster which questioned the film maker's ethics:

What is Paul Newman trying to hide? During a press conference on April 7, 1980, Paul Newman, the star of the film *Fort Apache the Bronx*, stated that the film was not racist. He said that the film was "realistic." Newman is being paid \$3,000,000 to participate in the film. Time Life Film Productions is promoting the film *Fort Apache* as: "a spine-chilling film about the South Bronx, an area of 40 blocks with the highest level of crime in all of New York. With gangs, drug addicts, drunks, prostitutes, pimps, maniacs and cop killers and the siege of the 41st Precinct, battling

¹⁰ ROSSINI, *Contemporary Latina/o Theater: Wrighting Ethnicity* cit., p. 30.

to survive in the middle of this riot." They do not mention the causes for the problems in our community, nor the struggles to fight these problems. They ignore the millions of Puerto Ricans and Blacks who are fighting for survival and to better themselves, their families and their people. Public protest against the movie *Fort Apache*. Come out and learn the truth about *Fort Apache*. Protest against this anti-Puerto Rican and Anti-Black film. Sponsored by the Committee Against *Fort Apache* (CAFA).¹¹

Similarly, Don Shewey warns, "[Piñero's] influence as a pioneering voice for Latino artistic expression ran parallel to his unrepentant relish for narcotics, impulsive crime, transgressive sex and other forms of bad behavior".¹² Therefore, in casting ex-con Piñero, Hollywood was able to represent Latinos through the body of a *specifically chosen*, openly-criminal Latino.

In his 2001 biopic, *Piñero* filmmaker Leon Ichaso alters the protagonist's physical body to promote a comfortable Latin brand with the casting of actor Benjamin Bratt as the diminutive actor. At 6'3, Bratt presents himself one foot taller and 100% sexier. Once again, the commercial Latino body is over-sexualized for mainstream consumption as Bratt replaces Piñero: sanitized, beautiful, and saintly. Ichaso notes that Piñero's acting method was "... built around the conditions of the ghetto and the sociopolitical atmosphere that blacks and Latinos absorbed in jail. Remember, he was fighting the incredible wave of mediocrity that the 70's were. He didn't have a little chain around his neck with a coke spoon. He wasn't dancing at Studio 54. He was doing poetry and theater, spoken word. If he would have just done it a little later, today every tooth in his mouth would be gold, and he'd be best friends with Puffy Combs".¹³

Though a risk, Hollywood chose to cast Piñero as a poor man's "saintly outlaw" in the cult classic, *Times Square* immediately following the success of *Fort Apache*. In the film, Piñero plays a strip club owner who allows an underage runaway, played by Trini Alvarado, to dance at his club after agreeing that she would **not** remove any clothing while doing so. Though Piñero himself was arrested as a teenager for hustling "johns" on New York's apocalyptic 42nd Street, Hollywood allowed Piñero to perform the role of a socially-conscious criminal in this film, allowing the lesbian overtones of the film's protagonists to provide the titillation for audiences instead.

Times Square is the perfect film to portray the grittiness and sublime aesthetic of Grindhouse cinema, beginning with a wide pan of the entire 42nd Street and Times

¹¹ J. MACKILLOP, *Excluding Miguel Pinero's Gritty Realistic Short Eyes, There is no Puerto Rican Dramatic Tradition*, in «Syracuse New Times». November 12, 2003, p. 15.

¹² D. SHEWEY, *Miguel Piñero*, http://www.donshewey.com/arts_articles/Piñero.html (accessed 5 May 2009).

¹³ *Ibid.*

Square strip circa 1979. Thus, the meta-theatrical depiction of Grindhouse cinema's home base becomes represented by the opening shot of the self-titled film, and Piñero, the physical embodiment of the porn saturated 1970s vice district. His placement within the film authenticates the criminalized Puerto Rican lowlifes who prey upon the denizens of 20th century Sodom and Gomorrah. Unfortunately, producer Robert Stigwood's sanitized simulacrum of Times Square lacks any semblance of reality as the film's characters escape the ravages of this decadence by "whitewashing" the actual face of the community. As an example of this self-cleansing narrative, Miguel Piñero, late in the film, dons a white suit and positions himself as an angel overseeing the horrors of this crime infested, pre-Rudy Giuliani metropolis. Though a supposed pimp, the film never suggests any abuse or links to prostitution when "protecting" either of the two female protagonists. Therefore, the danger that should be a natural element of the film is substituted for an inept attempt at humanizing crime-ridden, 1970s Times Square.

However, as Nicky, played by actress Robin Johnson, walks down 42nd Street, nine of the first ten derelicts captured on screen are cast as either Latino or Black males who drink, urinate, shadowbox, and listen to "ghetto blaster" radios in front of a movie poster featuring a snow white actress and emblazoned with the title, *Cry Rape* and a second feature called *Reclaim the Heart of the City*. In contrast to this seedy, ethnic tableau, the Anglo Nicky struts down the block in punk rock attire and rock guitar, passing minority disco patrons who eye her hungrily. Thus, within this sea of minority bodies, the sole white female is immediately positioned as a victim in need of salvation from these savage hordes. The film's opening dialogue is spoken by iconic Latina actress Elizabeth Peña, who portrays a prostitute who encounters Nicky and threatens her with the wrath of her pimp if Nicky does not stop playing a guitar which "sounds like shit." The danger, therefore, does not lie in the neighborhood itself but in the minorities that spend their days and nights on the streets.

Further, as Myra Mendible argues, "In the United States, the Latina body has signed in for somatic differences (body type, coloring, facial features) and differences in culture, class, language, religion, and sexuality. Consistently, its sign value has been linked to ideological currents, economic conditions, and political expediency".¹⁴ To complicate this reading of the Latina body further, Trini Alvarado, an actress of Latina heritage, is absurdly cast as Pamela, the Anglo 13-year old daughter of New York real estate mogul Daniel Pearl, who needs to be saved from this "X rated city." Mendible's interpretation of the media-perceived Latina body as "bananas and

¹⁴ M. MENDIBLE, *From Bananas to Buttocks: The Latina Body in Popular Film and Culture*, University of Texas Press, Austin 2007, p. 7.

buttocks" illuminates the notion that Latina performance serves to titillate audiences who desire a nostalgic gaze of the colonial image of Latinas (Carmen Miranda, Rita Hayworth, Dolores del Rio) while also enacting the political and economic rape of post-1898 Latin America.

For Mendible, these two symbols function "as commodities, and thus by definition as fetishized objects, consumed within an economics of desire that obscures the social relationships of its producers... inflect[ing] the Latina body as transnational signifier".¹⁵ In short, this Grindhouse film, masquerading as a Hollywood mainstream product, features within the first few minutes, a 42nd Street where every dark-skinned Latino and black resident is a pimp, prostitute, or derelict while an actual light-skinned Latina actress, capable of "passing" as white, is cast as an innocent teenager. Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez notes that these Hollywood produced ethnic bodies "put into question who is Latino/a, what is Latino identity, and which images of Latinidad predominate and circulate".¹⁶ To this extent Latina images become fair game for non-Latino sexual consumption. A case in point could be that of five-year-old Dora the Explorer, whose 6 month – 8 year old demographic audience were made to share this desire for a grown, over-sexualized Latina.

In 2009 the popular bilingual cartoon character was revamped for mass consumption by producers, aging her ten years and sprouting curves, long black hair, and a shortened skirt to accentuate her long legs. *Nickelodeon*, the parent company responsible for the multi-million dollar Dora franchise, was quick to note that their decision to remake "one doll in the Dora series" was based on marketing the Dora character to "young girls who have grown up to become young women." Dora, fully sexualized, was now perceived as "more womanly" and ironically, *more Latina*, substituting as Mendible theorizes, baby fat for "buttocks." Guillermo Irizarry Diaz describes the complex nature of "media constructed Latinidad" in analyzing Miguel Piñero's criminalized branding as well. In his essay, "Cadavers Encountered," he notes that predictably, the wide-ranging notion of Latinidad as a hybrid within the multi-cultural nation is targeted by the publishing industry, by television products such as *The George López Show* and the *Latin Grammys*, and by media-constructed personalities such as Jennifer López, Ricky Martin, Danny Trejo, and Eva Longoria, among others. Latinized hybridity, as a dominant paradigm for cultural exchange, has a clear correlation in practices of production and consumption, particularly in products intended for mass distribution.

By the mid-1980s, Piñero's appearance as Calderone in Michael Mann's prolific *Miami Vice* spurred a surge in his popularity while the actor's own personal battle

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ A. SANDOVAL-SÁNCHEZ, *De-Facing Mainstream Magazine Covers: The New Faces of Latino/a Transnational and Transcultural Celebrities*, in «Encrucijada/Crossroads», I, 2003, p. 16.

with narcotics, and his inability to escape the hustler's life, made him *persona non grata* following his stint on the show. Throughout his brief career, Piñero proved impossible to control, causing his professional life to spiral downwards. Both of his appearances on the national platform that was *Miami Vice*, and the opportunity to play a sympathetic character in *Times Square* were, to a large extent, torpedoed by the monetary necessity to become a clear cut, easily consumed Latino criminal in both media and in real life. Ironically, I believe that both Hollywood and Piñero were responsible for this branding. In short, the necessity to have actors play degenerate Latino roles allowed Piñero the economic ability to pursue his own subversive, "outlaw" lifestyle. Clearly, he may have been using the industry as well as allowing it to consume him.

However, prior to Piñero's death from cirrhosis (or rumored AIDS diagnosis) in 1988, his voice was purposely silenced by the entertainment industry. His roles continued to be minimized, particularly on television, where Piñero was afforded roles as drug dealers and hustlers in popular prime-time crime dramas. For those that knew Piñero, the necessity to make enough money to support his drug habit prompted him to accept these roles which called for a "mute" performance of Hollywood's derelict Latinidad, and discouraging what Piñero had been hailed for early in his career, namely, an improvisational, organic, dialectical style which captured his Lower East Side upbringing. As Rossini explains "Spatial politics gain a different valence when articulated through a Nuyorican lens... In the 1970s, the street was one of the real homes of the Puerto Rican underclass in New York's urban landscape and is the space where Piñero's players do the majority of their work".¹⁷ Therefore, Piñero's audience, both past and present, is allowed to capture a moment of his unique perspective; part criminal, part artist – or what many called his persona as a "saintly outlaw."

Robert Irizarry posits this performance of 1970s Nuyorican branding as a "house of pretension" playing off the success Piñero achieved with his penitentiary play and film, *Short Eyes*. Irizarry argues that "houses of detention and slum buildings confine Nuyoricans to limited quarters defined by their peripheral nature. Space here is represented not as an *a priori* category; rather it is constructed by the gestures, actions, songs, and linguistic practices, indeed the performances, of those who inhabit them".¹⁸ In accordance, the 1984 film *Alphabet City*, and Piñero's role in the production, served as the ultimate irony of the Hollywood/Piñero brand, as

¹⁷ J. ROSSINI, *Contemporary Latina/o Theater: Wrighting Ethnicity* cit., p. 44.

¹⁸ R. IRIZARRY, *The House of Pretension: Space and Performance in Miguel Piñero's Theatre*, in «Latin American Theater Review», 2, 2004, p. 79.

Piñero's own Lower East Side home is cinematically re-created for mass consumption, yet the actor who symbolized this barrio was hired to enact a non-speaking, non-credited role in the film.

Alphabet City featured Vincent Spano as a neighborhood heavy hitter who is told by his Mafia Don to torch his mother's tenement building for insurance money. Spano, his sister, and mother all portray Italian-American characters, stuck in the mire of the 1980s Lower East Side of Basquiat and Madonna. While they enact an "Alphabet City/neo-Guido mystique," a cultural population nearly extinct at the time of the filming, the neighborhood is visibly missing a key element, Puerto Ricans. Spano's neighborhood friend, a mixed African-American and Latino male played by beat-box champ Michael Winslow of *Police Academy* fame, seems to be the only minority in the neighborhood with a job – a drug dealer, who smokes crack throughout the film. As Silvio Torres-Saillant argues in "*Afro-Latinas/os and the Racial Wall*" that Latinos accept "a representation that relegates them to the realm of body and feeling in contra-distinction to whites who inhabit the sphere of mind and thought. As a result, a situation emerges that often allows the status quo to get away with including Latinas/os only symbolically, granting them space primarily in the realm of expressive culture".¹⁹ *Alphabet City* makes its dominant Latino demographic visible in solely one scene, a crack den tenement building where the minority actor extras portray crack addicts.

Miguel Piñero, the most widely known resident of this neighborhood is also present in this scene, portraying one of Spano's goons. Piñero, **unnamed, un-credited**, dons gang attire and helps Spano and Winslow escape to the roof of the building to flee the police. Piñero, having the opportunity to finally add his particular "flavor" to his own "organic" neighborhood, is relegated to a non-speaking role – made voiceless by the Hollywood machine that for so long used him to "authenticate" their own skewed vision of Latinos in New York. This necessity for a Nuyorican filmic aesthetic which allows for simple representation of the Latino criminal underworld has always appropriated stereotypical Latinidad, while promising an "authentic" experience akin to "hopping" a turnstile and taking a #5 train to the Bronx. Beginning in the 1950s, films that included this form of "illicit Latinidad" capitalized on a "street-wise" or "Latino-lazy" sentimentality that was often misinterpreted by Anglo producers as raw and real, or as Brian Herrera explains, "Even more, the racialized types, so often isolated as stereotypes, have accrued their own complex genealogies,

¹⁹ S. TORRES-SAILLANT, *Afro-Latinas/os and the Racial Wall*, in *A Companion to Latina/o Studies*, ed. Juan Flores and Renato Rosaldo, Blackwell Publishing, Malden 2007, p. 370.

wherein the contours of the character type, morph and adapt to the culture's shifting tastes and needs".²⁰

However, a recent turning point has begun to provide an alternative for this criminal, mass consumed Latinidad, namely, the success of the 2008 Tony Award winning Broadway musical and film, *In the Heights* and its creator, Lin-Manuel Miranda. Miranda, the son of upper-middle class parents, was educated in the highly competitive Hunter High School in Manhattan and felt equally at home with salsa music and hip-hop as he did with the American Musical canon. His desire to create a theatre piece which captured his life growing up in the Inwood section of Manhattan (also known as upper Washington Heights) was in direct response to the lack of representative Latinidad depicted on the film and television screens of his youth. Miranda, as a twenty-something musical connoisseur, brought up on Sondheim musical scores and Tupac Shakur mixtapes, sought to create an artistic piece of didactic theatre which paid homage to his own neighborhood, his people, and his music.

Raymond Knapp argues for the shared experience of "cultural" *communitas* as an integral part of being "present" in the audience when he proposes that the "American musical has always been deeply involved in questions of race and ethnicity, with racism and other forms of xenophobia continuing to constitute one of America's most contentious and persevering problems."²¹ However, for all his posturing and promises, I believe *In the Heights* proves incapable of capturing the promised, yet always impossible notion of, "authenticity" for Latinos in Washington Heights," though critics rushed to praise this very attribute of the "real." The final lyrics of the opening number sums up this attempted authenticity as Miranda raps, "You'll see the late nights/You'll taste beans and rice/The syrups and shaved ice/I ain't gonna say it twice/So turn up the stage lights/We're takin a flight to a couple of days/in the life of what it's like/In Washington Heights."

Unfortunately, I propose that Miranda has failed to capture this heralded authenticity because he underestimated two major considerations in his "all-inclusive pan-Latino" spectacle; the first being the representation of diversity among the inhabitants of Washington Heights, known for its multi-ethnic composition. The "*Sesame Street* meets *Do The Right Thing*" environment which Miranda created, featuring "happy" Latinos dancing and singing and a lack of intercultural exchange between Latinos and Anglos, offered an extremely simplistic, if not altogether misleading representation, of this Dominican-American enclave. Though the characters are quick to remind the audience that a gentrifying force is buying up the neighborhood,

²⁰ B.E. HERRERA, *Latin Numbers: Playing Latino in Twentieth-Century U.S. Popular Performance* cit., p. 139.

²¹ R. KNAPP, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2004 p. 181.

we are never given the opportunity to see the face of these intruders. The reason for this is simple... they are the very white, grey-haired, economically astute Broadway audience which encompasses Miranda's "base" and he does not want to ostracize them. I would argue that *In the Heights* is more a product of Latinized mass consumption, aimed chiefly at the economically advantaged audiences who could afford the \$127 ticket (2007) and *hungry* to see "Washington Heights on stage," rather than just securing a subway ride to this section of Manhattan. In fact, as prologue, Miranda's opening lyrics of the song *In the Heights* state, "Now you're prob'ly thinking/I'm up shit's creek/I've never been north of ninety-sixth street/Well you must take the A Train/Even farther than Harlem to northern Manhattan and maintain/Get off at 181st and take the escalator/I hope you're writin this down I'm gonna test ya later." After having seen the show multiple times, and speaking to many original cast members, I can attest to the fact that Miranda was purposely directed to speak this line to an audience member who might seem like an Anglo "visitor" to Washington Heights. More or less, a comfortable yet politically motivated nod to the Anglo perception of the "ghetto."

Thus the celebration necessary to achieve a true experience of *communitas* between the audience at the Richard Rodgers Theatre and the Latino artists who make up the cast of *In the Heights* seems fractured; neither moving towards an understanding of each other, except for moments when the characters seem to appease, through their "Latin-flavored" song and dance. This performance of Latinized "minstrelsy" for the Broadway and movie theatre audience is reminiscent of scenes from 1980s hip hop films which featured urban youth breakdancing and graffiti-writing for both the older "white folks" in the art gallery as well as the younger "white folks" in the movie theatre.

A second consideration stems from Miranda's frequent acknowledgment that his two inspirations for creating the play were Leonard Bernstein's iconic *West Side Story* and Paul Simon's Broadway musical, *The Capeman*, both of which are considered extremely poor attempts at representing realistic *Latinidad* on the Great White Way and silver screen. To this end, one year after the Broadway success of *In the Heights*, the spectre of *West Side Story* reared its head once again as its 50th anniversary revival began previews at the Palace Theatre directed by 91-year-old librettist Arthur Laurents. The musical which has historically received negative criticism from Latino scholars, chiefly spearheaded by Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez's brilliant treatise, "A Puerto Rican Reading of the 'America' of *West Side Story*," was now marketed by Laurents as "a different *West Side Story*".²²

²² H. HAUN, *Author Arthur: Repaving West Side Story*, in «Playbill», February 26, 2009.

The “difference” that Laurents praises is based on the fact that the new production featured Puerto Rican characters who code-switch between English and Spanish, with the non-Spanish speaking audience members given the opportunity to follow along with the help of “surtitle” LED displays above the proscenium. As critic Harry Haun explained, “Spanish is spoken here for the first time [giving] the Puerto Rican Sharks added authenticity, [and] putting them on a more equal footing with the Jets, their turf-war rival”.²³ Laurents further explained that his partner, Tom Hatcher, saw a production of the play in Colombia and realized that “when the hometown is Spanish (as if “Spanish” were a country) and the production is in Spanish, the Sharks become heroes and the Jets become villains.” This narrow-minded simplicity, though seeming culturally sensitive, is yet another example of appeasement by an Anglo producer that fails to question whether it is the linguistic choices made by the original production that are problematic or, as I would argue, the bigoted misrepresentation of the Puerto Rican experience in New York City.

In fact, it is this very call for urban “authenticity” which Latino Studies scholars have attempted to debunk for years, arguing that cultural authenticity through performance is an unattainable dream – particularly when the production is unaware of the customs which the represented group itself may perceive as “*imagined*.” Again, Juan Flores notes the difference between an approach which “breaks down [in order] to identify not the sum total but the constituent parts” and the “conceptual space of pan-group aggregation” or what he calls a “Latino imaginary,” where the Pan-Latino proponents can identify their representation in comparison to a larger whole.²⁴

Raymond Knapp’s analysis of the music from *West Side Story* perfectly describes this “imagined Latinidad” stressing that “[Leonard] Bernstein used a hard-edged jazz-blues idiom for the Jets and a rhythmically charged but generalized ‘Latin’ style for the immigrant Sharks, truer to what Americans would recognize as ‘South of the Border’ or generally Caribbean, than to the music specifically native to Puerto Rico. This strategy was in line with Broadway and Hollywood musical conventions – of setting ethnicity according to what a projected audience will recognize and accept, *without much concern for authenticity*”.²⁵ This attempt by the original Anglo creators of *West Side Story* – Arthur Laurents, Leonard Bernstein, Stephen Sondheim and Jerome Robbins – towards the creation of an even playing field for both sets of immigrants was a failure as audiences of the musical seem to project their own prejudices

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ J. FLORES, *From Bomba to Hip Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity*, Columbia University Press, New York 2000.

²⁵ R. KNAPP, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* cit., p. 206.

onto the Sharks as well, who are symbolized as foreign interlopers or worse, radically “un-American,” during the post-McCarthy era. Knapp insists that “the pattern for American musicals in recent decades has been to criticize prejudice on both sides, advocate tolerance, and remain smugly entrenched in the notion that, while West is better than East, it can learn to be better”.²⁶

The perception of the Puerto Rican Sharks will never be one of equal footing since the perceived envisioning of the group always remains, as Alberto Sandoval – Sánchez remarks, that of the “Latin-foreign other”.²⁷ This term becomes the basis upon which Sandoval-Sánchez builds his argument of the perception of Puerto Ricans in Hollywood musicals, namely that they will always be viewed as foreign, regardless of their post-1917 citizenship status in the United States. The fact that Laurents pays attention to a power struggle between characters based on language alone exemplifies the fact that he, and other “sacred cow” movie producers, cast Latinos as vehicles for stereotypical consumption for decades. Furthermore, as noted during the Washington D.C. previews of the revival, audiences became distracted while viewing “surtitle” technology prompting Laurents to remark “They're terribly distracting because the audience doesn't know where to look... it pulls them out of the scene. I think the answer would probably be to do what they did in the *old days*. You put the libretto in the program of those two scenes, which are heavily Spanish. Let them read them or not. It's up to them”.²⁸ Once again, Laurents finds himself debating not the cultural misrepresentation of the Sharks' Latinidad but rather the audiences' inability to consume this outdated presumption of being “foreign” based on language.

In summation, the Hollywood “branding” of Miguel Piñero, and I argue actors perceived as “Latino foreign” as opposed to “birthright American,” a dual collaboration of actor and system, has provided decades of filmic mass consumption and the opportunity to experience a Latinized simulacrum in the comfort of a safe, suburban movie theatre. In turn, the rare opportunity offered Piñero, to serve as a positive voice for his community, was self-sacrificed for the demons that ruled his life. When sharing his dramatic work in my Latina/o Literature or Theatre and Film courses, my students are always amazed at the insight of his poetry and storytelling. I am always concerned with his absence from their collective conscious as 21st century popular culture scholars. How showing pictures of Piñero, or scenes from his films, usually evoke the most interesting comments as to his identity: “Isn't that Cheech

²⁶ Ivi, p. 249.

²⁷ A. SANDOVAL-SÁNCHEZ, José, *Can You See? Latinos On and Off-Broadway*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 1999.

²⁸ H. HAUN, *Author Arthur: Repaving West Side Story* cit.

from *Macheté*?... That's the guy from *Shaft*!... My grandpa used to dress like that, *back in the days*."

Simply put, though 21st century Latinx audiences may not be aware of his name, or even his face, Hollywood continues to provide Latino gangsters, pimps, and drug dealers to a new generation of consumers in direct relation to the bigoted depiction of the urban Latin jungle which they began to create in the 1950s. In reflecting backwards – in remembering the wrong choices made in filmic representations of the 1970s and 80s – we may finally be able to forgive and remember the unique, organic, and oftentimes brilliant performances of the “branded outlaw” Miguel Piñero.