

CLASS : CULTURE

SERIES EDITORS

Amy Schragger Lang, Syracuse University, and Bill V. Mullen, Purdue University

RECENT TITLES IN THE SERIES:

Marcial González and Carlos Gallego, Editors, *Dialectical Imaginaries: Materialist Approaches to U.S. Latino/a Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism*

Sherry Lee Linkon, *The Half-Life of Deindustrialization: Working-Class Writing about Economic Restructuring*

Mark W. Robbins, *Middle Class Union: Organizing the 'Consuming Public' in Post-World War I America*

Marie A. Failing and Ezra Rosser, Editors, *The Poverty Law Canon: Exploring the Major Cases*

M. Michelle Robinson, *Dreams for Dead Bodies: Blackness, Labor, and the Corpus of American Detective Fiction*

Benjamin Balthaser, *Anti-Imperialist Modernism: Race and Transnational Radical Culture from the Great Depression to the Cold War*

Clarence Lang, *Black America in the Shadow of the Sixties: Notes on the Civil Rights Movement, Neoliberalism, and Politics*

Andréa N. Williams, *Dividing Lines: Class Anxiety and Postbellum Black Fiction*

Liam Kennedy and Stephen Shapiro, Editors, *The Wire: Race, Class, and Genre*

Mark W. Van Wienen, *American Socialist Triptych: The Literary-Political Work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Upton Sinclair, and W. E. B. Du Bois*

John Marsh, *Hog Butchers, Beggars, and Busboys: Poverty, Labor, and the Making of Modern American Poetry*

Matthew H. Bernstein, Editor, *Michael Moore: Filmmaker, Newsmaker, Cultural Icon*

Lorraine M. López, Editor, *An Angle of Vision: Women Writers on Their Poor and Working-Class Roots*

Carole Srole, *Transcribing Class and Gender: Masculinity and Femininity in Nineteenth-Century Courts and Offices*

Pamela Fox, *Natural Acts: Gender, Race, and Rusticity in Country Music*

Clarence Lang, *Grassroots at the Gateway: Class Politics and Black Freedom Struggle in St. Louis, 1936-75*

Fran Leeper Buss, Editor, *Moisture of the Earth: Mary Robinson, Civil Rights and Textile Union Activist*

Dialectical Imaginaries

MATERIALIST APPROACHES TO U.S. LATINO/A LITERATURE IN THE AGE OF NEOLIBERALISM

*Marcial González and
Carlos Gallego, Editors*

University of Michigan Press
Ann Arbor

Copyright © 2018 by Marcial González and Carlos Gallego

All rights reserved

This book may not be reproduced, in whole or in part, including illustrations, in any form (beyond that copying permitted by Sections 107 and 108 of the U.S. Copyright Law and except by reviewers for the public press), without written permission from the publisher.

Published in the United States of America by the

University of Michigan Press

Manufactured in the United States of America

Printed on acid-free paper

First published November 2018

A CIP catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Gonzalez, Marcial, 1953– editor. | Gallego, Carlos, 1971– editor.

Title: Dialectical imaginaries : materialist approaches to U.S. Latino/a literature in the age of neoliberalism / Marcial Gonzalez and Carlos Gallego, editors.

Other titles: Materialist approaches to U.S. Latino/a literature in the age of neoliberalism

Description: Ann Arbor : University of Michigan Press, [2018] | Includes bibliographical references and index. |

Identifiers: LCCN 2018021269 (print) | LCCN 2018028474 (ebook) | ISBN 9780472124114 (E-book) | ISBN 9780472073955 (hardcover : alk. paper) | ISBN 9780472053957 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: American literature—Hispanic American authors—History and criticism.

| Capitalism and literature—United States—History. | Marxist criticism—United States. |

Politics and literature—United States. | Social conflict in literature. | Hispanic Americans in literature. | Literature and society—United States.

Classification: LCC PS153.H56 (ebook) | LCC PS153.H56 D52 2018 (print) | DDC

810.9/868073—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018021269>

*For all those engaged in the fight against social injustice and inequality—
and for those who dare to imagine an alternative.*

Contents

INTRODUCTION

- Reading U.S. Latino/a Literature through Capitalism—
and Vice Versa I
Carlos Gallego and Marcial González

- CHAPTER 1. Marxism, Materialism, and Latino/a Literature:
What Is at Stake? 21
Rosaura Sánchez and Beatrice Pita

- CHAPTER 2. "When the Union Movement Was Murdered
in America": Neoliberalism and the Political Economy of
Class War in Alfredo Vea's *Gods Go Begging* 47
Dennis López

- CHAPTER 3. Quarantine Citizen: Latinx Poetry and the
Matter of Capital 75
Michael Dowdy

- CHAPTER 4. Historical Materialism, *The Decolonial Imaginary*, and
Chicana Feminist Theories in the Flesh 105
Marcelle Maese

- CHAPTER 5. A World Out of Whack: Criminal (In)justice and
Financial Capitalism in Sergio de la Pava's *A Naked Singularity* 133
R. Andrés Guzmán

CHAPTER 6. Pornocapitalism and the Translucent Borders of Social Identity in <i>Deck of Deeds</i> Carlos Gallego	159
CHAPTER 7. Bodega Sold Dreams: Middle-Class Panic and the Cross-over Aesthetics of <i>In the Heights</i> Elena Machado Sáez	187
CHAPTER 8. The Dialectics of Presence and Futurity in the Contemporary U.S. Latino/a Novel Mathias Nilges	217
CHAPTER 9. Crisis and Migration in Posthegemonic Times: Primitive Accumulation and Labor in <i>La Bestia</i> Abraham Acosta	241
CHAPTER 10. A Chicana Dystopian Novel and the Economic Realities of <i>Their Dogs Came with Them</i> Edén Torres	263
CHAPTER 11. Mass Incarceration and the Critique of Capitalism: A Working-Class Viewpoint in Ronald Ruiz's <i>Happy Birthday Jesús</i> Marcial González	287
<i>Bibliography</i>	313
<i>Contributors</i>	335
<i>Index</i>	339

Introduction

Reading U.S. Latino/a Literature through Capitalism—and Vice Versa

Carlos Gallego and Marcial González

Class, as a legitimate category for literary interpretation, was slowly but effectively marginalized and delegitimated in the United States during the 1980s, especially after the fall of the Soviet Union. The neoliberal ideological euphoria that followed celebrated the global triumph of parliamentary capitalism and “the end of history,”¹ a slogan that was meant as a prescription for the end of class struggle and dialectical materialism. Critical approaches to the study of race and ethnicity during this period were not unaffected by these political developments, and the radical antiracist discourses of the 1960s and 1970s among creative writers, scholars, and activists eventually gave way to U.S. neoliberalist notions of multiculturalism and identity politics. Despite contemporary neoliberal claims that class warfare no longer exists, recent politico-economic events such as the 2008 financial crash have continued to demonstrate—and recent political movements such as Occupy, the Zapatistas, and Black Lives Matter have continued to confirm—that the sustained, violent oppression of racialized, working-class peoples in the Americas not only persists but, indeed, has intensified. The authors of some recent works of literary and cultural criticism² have recognized the need to study literature and culture by incorporating social class analysis in their work, and our aim is to contribute to this cause. To that end, *Dialectical Imaginaries: Materialist Approaches to U.S. Latino/a Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* brings together eleven

CHAPTER 7

Bodega Sold Dreams

Middle-Class Panic and the Crossover Aesthetics of *In the Heights*

Elena Machado Sáez

Puerto Ricans Quiara Alegría Hudes and Lin-Manuel Miranda brought Dominican York to Broadway with *In the Heights*, which won a Tony for Best Musical in 2008. The reception of *In the Heights* hailed it as a welcome change from prior Broadway musicals about Latinxs, namely *West Side Story* and *The Capeman*—in other words, as a musical that challenges the racial borders of the Great White Way. I instead read *In the Heights* as representative of a middle-class politics that is haunted by the inability to speak for a working-class experience of Latinidad and threatened by the stereotypes of chaos and poverty associated with U.S. Latinx working-class subjectivities. The musical is also preoccupied with the crowding out of the middle class from urban centers like New York City via the gentrification of ethnic enclaves and the concurrent disappearance of small, local businesses. The tension over what constitutes an authentic depiction of Latinidad informs what I call the crossover aesthetics of the musical. *In the Heights* seeks to translate for a predominantly white mainstream audience a set of cultural referents that are specific to a unique ethnic, racial, classed U.S. Latinx literary tradition. The musical acknowledges how decontextualization facilitates the move between U.S. Latinx and mainstream public spheres and, in turn, its vision of a pan-Latinx community. *In the Heights* is troubled by the work of crossing over and by the history of how U.S. Latinxs have been depicted on the Broadway stage. While it focuses on the concerns of a U.S. Latinx busi-

ness class, the musical also references the ways that the artistic and activist legacy of the Nuyorican community challenges the priorities of crossover consumption. The nuances of the play's crossover aesthetics are flattened out by a reception that is fixated on delimited notions of cultural authenticity. I aim to complicate the expectation of authenticity attached to this play, peeling away the hyperpositive guise of pan-Latinidad celebrated by the reception and even at times the musical itself. In turn, I perform a reading of *In the Heights* that acknowledges, first, how the musical is in dialogue with a U.S. Latinx civil rights generation, and second, how the musical embodies a crisis of imagination and authority on the part of U.S. Latinx middle-class cultural creatives. By adopting the conceptual frameworks from Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez's essay, "An Octopus with Many Legs: U.S. Latino Theater and Its Diversity" (1999) and Elda María Román's *Race and Upward Mobility: Seeking, Gatekeeping, and Other Class Strategies in Postwar America* (2017), I argue that supplementing an analysis of *In the Heights* with an appraisal of the identity politics of its authors and their discursive inheritances can help us critically examine the musical's crossover aesthetics.

The question of how is it that two Puerto Ricans end up writing a musical about a Dominican neighborhood leads us to an interesting set of historical contexts. On the one hand, the representation of a pan-Latinidad is a contemporary phenomenon that represents a shift away from the theatrical traditions of the civil rights generation. Sandoval-Sánchez describes how "a new kind of transculturation, one that results from the interaction and transaction with other Latino/as," has transformed "[w]hat was once a unique ethnic theater (i.e. Chicano, Nuyorican)" into "a conglomerate and fusion of Latin American ethnonationalist roots and experiences."¹ The representation of pan-Latinidad stems from the diversification of the U.S. Latinx population within the United States—for instance, the shift from a Latinx population in New York City that was dominated by Puerto Ricans (and to a lesser extent Cubans) to one that includes other immigrant diasporas, like that of Dominicans as well as Mexicans and Central Americans. The *In the Heights* character of Carla perfectly encapsulates this pan-Latinidad when she explains that "[m]y mom is Dominican-Cuban, my dad is from Chile and PR, which means I'm Chile-Domini-Curican, but I always say I'm from Queens!"² Within the world of theater, a homogeneous representation of class in relation to Latinidad has curiously accompanied the cultural diversification of the New York Latinx population. Sandoval-Sánchez notes that

the most recent generation of cultural creatives produce a "sanitized" depiction of pan-Latinidad by excluding working-poor experiences:

Since the 1980s, the move for many professional U.S. Latinos/as has been to make it in the mainstream and, in order to do so, the barrio experience and political/social agenda must be displaced and erased. Some playwrights, on their yellow brick road to success, promote hegemonic middle class values and silence the dramatic plots of "ghetto" realities. There are no roles for losers, delinquents, drug addicts, and "uneducated" Spanish-speaking Latinos/as, primarily because these plays are not written for barrio audiences, migrant workers, illegal aliens, and their concerns. In mainstream productions, the act must be cleaned up when the curtain rises. Middle-class Anglo-American audiences expect to be mesmerized with the exoticism of magical realism and to be entertained with rags-to-riches stories or sagas of assimilation and success.³

I would argue that this transcultural Latinidad with its privileging of cultural translation and upward mobility also functions as a writerly strategy, a crossover aesthetics that is responsive to the historical exclusion of Latinidad from Broadway and the burden of representation that is placed on the isolated cases of Latinx-authored productions that make it onto the mainstream stage. *In the Heights* is therefore in dialogue with the literary tradition of U.S. Latinx writing preceding it, especially a 1960s Nuyorican imaginary.

The gaps in Broadway's representation of Latinidad on the basis of class is referenced in two ways: with the characters' deployment of civil rights vocabulary that historically gave voice to the concerns of the downwardly mobile, and with the blackout scene, which reproduces the invisibility of the working poor as a concrete threat (we see the material damage wrought by this population, the destruction of the bodega, but the people who perform this violence never emerge onstage). Via the characterization of Graffiti Pete and Usnavi, the musical acknowledges how capitalism relies on competition between the working and middle classes, and that an alliance between them is necessary to prevent the neighborhood's gentrification by implicitly white upper-class elites. At the same time, the musical inherits the ambivalent relationship to the marketplace of Nuyorican artists, who envisioned the market as a place that could productively broaden access to cultural production while also negatively decontextualizing Latinx-produced art.

I begin my analysis by addressing how the identity politics of the librettist and lyricist have been deployed in order to authorize *In the Heights* as a more affirmative, upbeat, and therefore more authentic representation of Latinidad. Following the lead of Sandoval-Sánchez who argues that “it is vital to locate playwrights in given relations of power and discursive formations in order to determine their identity politics,”⁴ I trouble the multiculturalist label of authenticity attached to Hudes and Miranda by highlighting the authors’ autobiographical descriptions of their educational and class backgrounds. The Puerto Rican heritage of Hudes and Miranda uniquely informs their conflicted class associations and migratory experiences, while also marking them as part of a contemporary generation that Elda María Román describes as wrestling with and producing narratives about “status panic” or the vulnerable positioning of middle-class ethnics.⁵ With a more nuanced picture of the authors’ identity politics, I resituate the upward mobility narrative of *In the Heights* within a history of Nuyorican performance poetry, focusing on how the musical repurposes the iconography of bodegas, coffee, and lottery tickets from Pedro Pietri’s “Broken English Dream” and Miguel Piñero’s “La Bodega Sold Dreams.” In the final section of this chapter, I analyze three songs from *In the Heights*: “In the Heights,” “96,000,” and “Blackout.” I explore how the musical populates the neighborhood of the barrio in these songs and how it defines community by articulating the shared concern of class struggle. The translation of a Nuyorican imaginary into a mainstream cultural product about an urban Dominican American community relies upon the depiction of a pan-Latinx solidarity that is in actuality quite class-specific, deploying the imagery of class disempowerment from the civil rights generation to describe the struggles of a contemporary business-owning middle-class population. At different moments, this appropriation is fractured by the violence that it requires in order to erase these symbols of their unique historical context (especially evident in the musical’s citywide blackout scene), while at the same time, the ideology of the play cannot help but refer back to and be indebted to Nuyorican progressive, working-class movements.

WRITERLY AUTHORITY, AUTHENTICITY, AND IDENTITY POLITICS

In the introduction to the libretto of *In the Heights*, Jill Furman emphasizes the distance between *In the Heights* and the Broadway musicals about

Latinidad that came before it. *In the Heights* “helped usher in a new era on Broadway by being the first musical to successfully integrate hip-hop into the aural landscape” and depict “Latino culture in a positive and realistic light” as opposed to the “more stereotypical and negative” “previous theatrical examples.”⁶ The ghosts of *West Side Story* and *The Capeman* as well as the Broadway “firsts” of U.S. Latinx theater remain nameless but powerful counterpoints in Furman’s narrative. As Sandoval-Sánchez notes, “general audiences” interpreted the first U.S. Latinx-authored plays that crossed over into Broadway—*Short Eyes* in 1973, *Zoot Suit* in 1979, and *Cuba and His Teddy Bear* in 1986—as “embodiment[s] of derogatory stereotypes of U.S. Latinos/as.”⁷ Due to the “burden of representation” placed on U.S. Latinx theater, the working-class aesthetics of such productions could “easily perpetuate the stereotyping of U.S. Latinos as delinquents, gang members, criminals, drug users, or as underdogs of the disenfranchised American working class.”⁸ By indirectly referencing the staging of a class-specific Latinidad associated with poverty and underemployment, Furman reassures readers that now is a “new era on Broadway” that can genuinely claim to integrate Other stories into the Great White Way.⁹ *In the Heights* reaffirms its corrective vision of the U.S. Latinx community, with music “never heard before in a musical” accompanying a new perspective on Latinidad that Furman finds is “positive and realistic.”¹⁰ A peculiar equation emerges where affirming positive aspects of the Latinx experience is read as an authentic gesture, while representing oppression or adverse conditions is necessarily deemed stereotyping.

Furman’s marshaling of cultural authenticity to authorize the symbolic significance and success of the musical also informs the way she positions the creative voices of Lin-Manuel Miranda and Quiara Alegría Hudes:

[W]e began trying to find a writer who could make the book sing in the same way the music did. Enter Quiara Hudes, who had recently received an MFA from the playwrighting program at Brown University. She and Lin had similar backgrounds, and like the *In the Heights* character of Nina Rosario, Quiara was the first person in her family to go to college, having received her undergraduate degree in musical composition from Yale. She understood the world and the story completely, and also had a real feel for the rhythms of the neighborhood.¹¹

With this origin story about the collaboration between Miranda and Hudes, Furman calls attention to the parallels between these creative minds in terms of shared “backgrounds” as well as an “understanding” and “feel” for

the "rhythm" of Washington Heights.¹² But aside from Hudes's experience as a first-generation college student and the vague allusions to a common Latinidad, what exactly *are* the identity politics of the lyricist (Miranda) and librettist (Hudes)? Much of the advance press and reception for the musical takes up this mantle of cultural authenticity by affirming specific biographical elements to authorize the art of Miranda and Hudes. For example, Robert Hofler from *Variety Magazine* highlights the geographical proximity of Miranda's childhood home to the imagined locale of the musical: "Miranda actually grew up in Inwood, the neighborhood just north of Washington Heights in Manhattan."¹³ Hofler's label of "legit" "groundbreakers" also places demands upon Miranda and Hudes to authenticate the musical via these autobiographical routes.¹⁴ Such statements recall the burden of representation that Sandoval-Sánchez describes as part and parcel of U.S. Latinx crossover experiences on Broadway.

By contrast, critic Campbell Robertson of the *New York Times* follows the claim that Miranda has "musical bona fides" by deconstructing the lyricist's cultural authenticity.¹⁵ Asking him to describe "the experience of growing up in Washington Heights," Robertson extracts a response that appears to call into question Miranda's access to authentic U.S. Latinx culture. Miranda states that during his childhood "[m]ost of [his] friends were white and Jewish" and that he "was pretty isolated from" local Latinxs.¹⁶ Robertson describes Miranda as "profoundly affable" and "self-deprecating," with the implied lack of cultural authenticity as something that the playwright is apologetic but forthcoming about.¹⁷ In turn, Robertson highlights the non-Latinx social sphere of Miranda's childhood friendships (as opposed to his family, for example) as a context that explains the aesthetics of the musical as well as its Broadway success: "The focus on outsiders, people who are in the neighborhood but are not exactly of the neighborhood, was no coincidence given Mr. Miranda's experience."¹⁸ The characters' lack of belonging to the space of Washington Heights is attributed to Miranda's biography rather than the depiction of their racial or class backgrounds. This outsider-ness is also tied to the "neighborhood's rose-tinted-portrait" of Latinidad,¹⁹ which Robertson equates with the whitewashing of this ethnic neighborhood's realities. The status of *In the Heights* as a musical, a "genre [that] tends to be filled with those kinds of characters anyway,"²⁰ excuses or necessitates an upbeat and optimistic portrayal, although the success of a musical like *West Side Story* appears to call into question the claim that joyful idealism is endemic to the genre. The review qualifies the Broadway success of a U.S.

Latinx production by emphasizing that its authenticity has been compromised by its appeal to a mainstream audience. Such critical popularity is deemed a sign of how effectively the musical caters to the desires of white Broadway audiences, with "rap that appeals to people who normally don't like rap."²¹

I find these responses to *In the Heights*, which either hail the musical as the arrival of a finally authentic U.S. Latinx voice that rectifies racial stereotypes or decry it as an assimilationist vehicle that sells out Latinidad, to be quite unsatisfying. The either/or assessment of the musical's authenticity misses out on the opportunity to examine the ways that the musical speaks to the conflicted artistic inheritance of contemporary U.S. Latinx writers—in other words, how the writers themselves explore the stakes of cultural belonging via their creative production. Román's important intervention into the analysis of "aspirational narratives"²² and engagement with what "ethnicity means[s] in the context of middle- or upper-middle-class experiences" has interesting implications for my exploration of Hudes's and Miranda's identity politics.²³ Román discusses "the unprecedented growth rates" experienced by "African American and Mexican American middle classes" after World War II as an economic reality that transformed not only the representation of such populations within mainstream culture—such that "Black and Latina/o actors began to reflect a wider set of vocations by portraying white-collar professionals and people in high status positions"—but also produced a "middle class panic" among U.S. minority cultural creatives.²⁴ I expand upon Román's argument by positing that Miranda and Hudes belong to a Puerto Rican generation of middle-class artists who are "grappling with the simultaneous expansion and contraction of group boundaries" for Latinidad.²⁵ Just as a middle-class status is a shared personal and historical context for these cultural producers, the problem of ethnic and class allegiances is a central concern. World War II did indeed spur the growth of a Puerto Rican middle class, but it is important to note that Operation Bootstrap created a different experience of upward mobility for Puerto Ricans, since as Ramón Grosfoguel notes in *Colonial Subjects* (2003) that the project sought to "transform Puerto Rico into a symbolic showcase of the American capitalist model of development for the Third World."²⁶ Such a transformation required the elimination of extreme poverty on the island via the "emigration of the lower strata of the island [which] made possible the showcasing of Puerto Rico to the extent that it allowed the upward mobility of those who stayed."²⁷ Puerto Rican citizens on the island versus

the mainland were valued differently and given diverging paths of class mobility: "Since the Puerto Rican showcase was directed at islanders and not migrants, U.S. state resources were channeled to the former, not the latter. Those who migrated did not receive the proper state support . . . end[ing] up in the metropolises' urban ghettos as unskilled low-wage workers with one of the highest poverty rates in the United States."²⁸ Immigration did not equal upward class mobility for Puerto Ricans. Quite the opposite, those who moved to the mainland experienced a horizontal journey from rural to urban poverty, while their counterparts on the island were buoyed by federal government investment and support. As Puerto Rican middle-class creatives, Miranda and Hudes inherit a contradictory association of mobility and class status, provoked by how the middle-class ascension of one Puerto Rican community required the expulsion of another.

In order to arrive at a more nuanced picture of the complex negotiations over cultural authenticity and appropriation that are central to the emplotment of *In the Heights*, I'd like to highlight a key set of continuities in the biographies of Lin-Manuel Miranda and Quiara Alegría Hudes: family politics and activism as well as an experiential education in border crossing. Miranda's parents are both middle-class professionals who emigrated to the United States, belonging to that island generation whose upward mobility was facilitated by Operation Bootstrap. His father, Luis Miranda, "was an adviser to late New York Mayor Ed Koch" and "continues to work as a campaign consultant."²⁹ The parental model of activism is an important parallel linking the biographies of the musical's lyricist and librettist. Hudes's parents are often described as working class, and her mother, Virginia Perez, "graduated high school" and had a successful career in the nonprofit sector.³⁰ Hudes explains that "[m]y mom worked at American Friends Service Committee doing activist work around the country for teenagers of color," ran the "CHOICE hotline in Philadelphia" which answered "question[s] about sexuality, about violence, about reproductive" rights, and also founded "Casa Comadre, which was based in the Latin community and offered resources" to underprivileged women.³¹ Miranda and Hudes therefore come from families where political activism is valued, often with work geared toward transforming establishment institutions (like political campaigns) as well as addressing problems of social justice and equality in terms of race, class, and gender. In other words, they are both witnesses to the importance of activism within Latinx public life and how the work of social justice is key

to improving a minority community's access to political power and change.

On the surface, the biographical trajectories of the creators of *In the Heights* can be read as a simple story of educational privilege and success. Both artists attended highly selective public high schools and went on to obtain degrees at elite private colleges. Nevertheless, their autobiographical accounts describe similar transformative experiences of geographic and cultural border crossings that belie the assumption of cultural assimilation. Román describes how a "minority culture of mobility" is in part produced by the tensions that middle-class cultural producers experience between their class and ethnic allegiances.³² Such artists pay what Román calls an "identity tax" as a result of upward mobility, that there is in effect "a price to pay for one's nonwhite racial identity."³³ By extension, "ethnic cultural production serves both as a product of this tax and as a payment of the social and aesthetic dues given to both the mainstream and the ethnic community."³⁴ A culture of mobility arises as a survival strategy "to deal with marginality and inequality" as well as out of an obligation to prove one's worth or belonging to normative (white) society and to one's particular ethnic group.³⁵ In reviewing their autobiographical statements, Miranda and Hudes are shown to draw upon and contribute to this vocabulary of mobility, a discourse that processes the limits of class and ethnic affiliation.

Miranda "grew up commuting between a Hispanic neighborhood in northern Manhattan and a highly selective Upper East Side public school for gifted kids."³⁶ He describes the transition as resulting in the "bifurcation of my childhood" that taught him to "code-switch."³⁷ Miranda recalls that border-crossing as "super stark when there's another language involved" such that "they call me Lin at school and Lin-Manuel at home. I speak Spanish at home and English at school."³⁸ Robertson's emphasis on Miranda's outsider status in relation to Latinidad focuses on only one public—that of his formal education—but Miranda's commentary reveals that traveling between the space of home and school entailed a constant process of shifting identifications and community belonging. Miranda also frames his education at Wesleyan in terms of a rerooting via a pan-Latinx culture:

I lived in a Latino program house my sophomore year at Wesleyan. It was called La Casa. . . . [Y]ou had to write an essay to get in about why you were a Latino community leader, and that was the first time. . . . [T]here were kids whose parents owned *bodegas*, and there are kids whose

parents were both Wesleyan alums and they always knew they were going to Wesleyan and they're Latino, but they've got the code switch down easy like I do.³⁹

Affinity housing connects Miranda to a population of middle-class U.S. Latinxs who similarly had to translate themselves as they moved between Latinx and white-dominant communities. Miranda also cites the "Latin Pop boom of '99/2000" as an important inspiration for *In the Heights*, with "Ricky Martin, Marc Anthony, Jennifer Lopez all of a sudden becoming mainstream."⁴⁰ Popular culture provided models of crossover aesthetics that were reinforced by the college community of Latinxs that Miranda found at Wesleyan. Miranda's autobiographical narrative valorizes his ability to navigate different publics, moving back and forth between U.S. Latinx and mainstream U.S. culture.

Hudes also describes her childhood as one that entailed constant transition: "Growing up in West Philly and having family in North Philly placed me in two very distinct neighborhoods, both with a strong sense of community and history, where interesting ethnicities and nationalities were always mingling."⁴¹ In contrast to Miranda, she describes her home space as non-Latinx and middle class. Hudes explains that she was raised "in West Philly, which is not Puerto Rican but a much more diverse international immigrant community. We were the only Latinos I knew in that particular neighborhood."⁴² She was hyperaware of the class differences between her home neighborhood and that of her mother's family in North Philly: "[Y]ou could see these nice houses, with paint on the window ledges and all that stuff. Then block by block you'd see it transform. . . . Then there'd be three vacant lots, and one house that's boarded up, and one that has burned down. I learned to be aware of that class dichotomy, even within my own family."⁴³ Traveling between these different class and ethnic communities, Hudes recalls "being frustrated that there were members of my family with whom I was very close, but who, in terms of the infrastructure of Philadelphia, were invisible and unknown."⁴⁴ While Miranda describes a shift of upward mobility, from his home barrio to the school neighborhood, Hudes narrates the transformative effect of downward mobility in visiting her extended Puerto Rican family. She emphasizes the same feeling of bifurcation as Miranda, crediting her ability to read the class shifts in different geographic spaces of Philadelphia to her self-identification as a biracial and bicultural child: "You cross one street and all of a sudden the whole landscape

of the city changes. I was very aware of these things and I think of being of mixed background—being half Jewish and half Puerto Rican—and also being much lighter than the rest of my family, I was always shuffling between communities. I was inside and outside of those communities at the same time."⁴⁵ Routinely crossing over the borders of class, race, and culture was a defining aspect of Hudes's familial context.

Both the lyricist and librettist acknowledge this experiential education informed their conceptions of artistic obligation and contributions to *In the Heights*. One of the lessons that Miranda learned in high school from seeing the fallout on Broadway over *The Capeman* was to accept the logic equating positive depictions of U.S. minority populations with realism and authenticity, to value a "more realistic world" with "the small business owner and not the guy on the corner."⁴⁶ His desire to create "a show with Latino people where we aren't gang members and drug dealers" focused on creating an alternative to non-Latinx productions on Broadway, which was later reinforced by his encounter with a U.S. Latinx middle-class community in college. Miranda came to see the role of the U.S. Latinx playwright in terms of an ethical imperative: "I think writers of color . . . that's partly your responsibility," "you have to write the show that only you can write."⁴⁷ If the working-class realities of U.S. Latinxs had "been super well represented already," then the obligation was to depict another layer of the community that was invisible to the mainstream.⁴⁸ While *In the Heights* is Miranda's brainchild, Hudes played a significant role in the translation of the play for Broadway as well as the formalization into a published libretto of what had been up to that point a routinely amended script. Based on her knowledge of her extended family, Hudes saw the experiences of working-class Latinxs as equally excluded from mainstream depictions of Latinidad. She describes the collaboration between herself and Miranda as "a weird tango" because "there was already an extant script, with a full complement of songs" when she was brought into the creative process by Furman and her production team.⁴⁹ Furman notes that the primary plot of *In the Heights* prior to Hudes's involvement was "a small love story that happened to be set in the particular area of Washington Heights."⁵⁰ Hudes remarks that she was "able to get more conflict into the show for the Broadway draft" by involving the existing characters "in new plots, notably the ups-and-downs of three businesses on the musical's iconic block in Washington Heights."⁵¹ The creative partnership of Miranda and Hudes generates the emplotment of a trans-cultural Latinidad and crossover aesthetics. Furman describes the outcome

of this collaborative process in terms of the script “morph[ing] into a love letter to the entire neighborhood and its diverse Latino culture,” with a new emphasis on “the immigrant experience and chasing the American Dream” within the context of gentrification.⁵² With both artists shaped by and invested in a culture of mobility, the joint project of the musical articulates the middle-class panic of a Latinx population. The identity politics of Miranda and Hudes as well as the unique dynamics of their artistic exchange inform the Broadway production of *In the Heights* and its libretto, especially the ambivalence the musical expresses regarding the relationship between artistic production, the mainstream market, and social class allegiances.

NUYORICAN PRECURSORS AND THE WORKING-CLASS LATINIDADES OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS GENERATION

The profiles of Miranda and Hudes confirm Sandoval-Sánchez’s description of the new generation of U.S. Latinx playwrights as “professionals who have received formal education, who are an integral part of the middle class, and whose home is here in the U.S.”⁵³ The cultural specificity of their middle-class Puerto Rican backgrounds is vital to the way *In the Heights* imagines Dominican York. *In the Heights* revolves around a bodega as the crossroads for community building and conflict. As Sandoval-Sánchez notes, “These new playwrights revisit, re-vision, and reimagine the history of Latino diaspora, exile and nostalgia, as new hybrid identities are articulated and constructed on the stage.”⁵⁴ *In the Heights* engages the signifiers of working-class Latinidad, and I analyze Pedro Pietri’s “Broken English Dream” and Miguel Piñero’s “La Bodega Sold Dreams” to identify the working-class aesthetics that the musical is revisiting and revising. Following this overview, I turn to the opening musical performance of *In the Heights* in order to reflect on how the symbols of the bodega, coffee, and the lottery are repurposed to imagine a transnational Latinidad with middle-class inflections. Here my argument departs from that of Román, who avoids “rags-to-riches tales” in favor of representations “of class mobility achieved through various types of labor.”⁵⁵ Despite the musical’s attention to small-business owners, the happy ending of the musical ultimately credits the lottery for their mobility and the salvation of the neighborhood bodega’s future. In so doing, the musical appears to echo the civil rights critique voiced by the Nuyorican poets—that the American Dream

formula of working hard to get ahead is a lie, that the tax levied by institutional racism means that labor cannot facilitate upward mobility.

From the biographies of Pedro Pietri and Miguel Piñero, one can ascertain the unique historical contexts that inform the creative production of these Puerto Ricans, who resided in New York City during the sixties: the Vietnam War, the economic recession, the prison industrial complex, and social justice movements. Juan Flores in *From Bomba to Hip-Hop* (2000) notes the “emergence of a new generation of New York Puerto Rican politics and culture in the 1960s, when community-based and nongovernmental organizations were formed to fill the representational void.”⁵⁶ “Aware of this vacuum,” Nuyorican cultural workers “responded by establishing makeshift, neighborhood spaces.”⁵⁷ Pietri and Piñero were key collaborators in the formation of these grassroots cultural institutions. Pietri, the son of a dishwasher, returned from the Vietnam War and joined the Young Lords civil rights group. His most famous public performance, a reading of “Puerto Rican Obituary,” took place in 1969 when the Young Lords occupied the First Spanish Methodist Church in order to institute a free breakfast program.⁵⁸ Miguel Piñero, a junior high school dropout, was released on parole from Sing Sing Prison in 1973 and his first play, *Short Eyes*, was performed that same year on the Broadway stage.⁵⁹ Together with Miguel Algarin and a number of other U.S. Latinx poets, Pietri and Piñero founded the Nuyorican Poets Café in 1973.⁶⁰ While they came to poetry by different routes, both creative writers were born in Puerto Rico in the 1940s and migrated to New York City when they were young children. The urban environment and their experiences growing up in working-class neighborhoods—Pietri in Spanish Harlem and Piñero on the Lower East Side—shape the depiction of Latinidad within their art. Pietri and Piñero’s model of intertwining activism and art is an important legacy and context for interpreting *In the Heights*, especially the way the musical imagines the landscape of the U.S. Latinx barrio, the concerns of those who reside there, and the power dynamics of exploitation and competition between working-class and business communities.

In Pedro Pietri’s “Broken English Dream” (1971), the “we” of Latinidad is bonded by a shared experience of poverty, which is defined by exploitation and debt. The poem opens with a revised narrative of Christmas Eve and its much-awaited arrival of a joyful gift: “It was the night / before the welfare check / and everybody sat around the table / hungry heartbroken cold confused.”⁶¹ The stark reality of hunger makes clear that the welfare check will do little to alleviate the systemic suffering of this family. The domestic

space is not only claustrophobic—"hanging out in the kitchen / which was also the livingroom / the bedroom and the linen closet"⁶²—but it provides no sense of belonging or security. The community of the poem teeters on the edge of subsistence and homelessness, with the "slumlord" demanding "the rent we were unable to pay six month ago" and threatening eviction.⁶³ The street is not an idyllic alternative, described as a "place where the night lives and the temperature is below zero three-hundred sixty-five days a year."⁶⁴ These U.S. Latinxs are the working poor, who "dream about jobs you will never get" and find they can "work full time and still be unemployed."⁶⁵ There is no escape from the cycle of poverty since one can "graduate from school without an education" in "the united states of installment plans / One nation under discrimination."⁶⁶ Genuine employment and intellectual growth are illusions, part and parcel of the deceptive advertising offered to the Latinx working-class. The immigrant Latinx community of the poem finds that racism and economic injustice prevent upward mobility: "We follow the sign / that says welcome to America / but keep your hands off the property."⁶⁷ There is no access to ownership, only marginality. The shared concern of this community is survival, but such a goal is depicted as perpetually out of reach. The poem suggests that class struggle informs ethnic identity and that sixties Latinidad in particular emerges as a response to the economic realities of capitalism.

In addition to the real estate market, the poem populates the Latinx barrio with various other businesses: grocery stores, pawn shops, funeral parlors, liquor stores, and prostitution. These industries are depicted as parasitical, exploiting the local population, deriving profit from their patronage: "The grocery stores were outnumbered by / funeral parlors with neon signs that said / Customers wanted No experience necessary / . . . a liquor store / everywhere you looked filled the polluted / air with on the job training prostitutes."⁶⁸ The business owners give nothing back to the community, or, worse, market a self-destructive narrative of freedom: "Vote for me! Said the undertaker: I am / the man with the solution to your problems."⁶⁹ The opposition between the interests of the businesses and the barrio is emphasized by the fact that these owners do not reside in the city but are "White business owners from clean-cut / plush push button neat neighborhoods," who enjoy the fruits of their financial success from the safety of their suburban homes.⁷⁰ The consumption and debt economy reinforces the systemic oppression in this "america / land of the free / for everybody / but our family."⁷¹ The historical contexts of U.S. empire and Operation Bootstrap, the

industrialization of Puerto Rico, are referenced as broader forces that define the Latinidad of the poem's community and its experience of discrimination on the U.S. mainland. The Bootstrap project promises that the immigrants will receive "the leading toothpaste" in exchange for the purchase of a "box of cornflakes on the lay-away plan."⁷² Meager individual gains are rationalized by the government's economic policy in order to support the debt trade, with debt identified as a valuable commodity within the U.S. capitalist economy. Even U.S. Latinx cultural practices can be reoriented toward such exploitation, since "this is america / where they keep you / busy singing / en mi casa toman bustelo."⁷³ The poem concludes with a return to the domestic space, now framed by the commercial jingle of Bustelo coffee, a sinister soundtrack for a decontextualization that reinforces the cycle of poverty.⁷⁴ The icon of coffee and the themes of property ownership, class mobility, and the marketplace are revisited by *In the Heights*, but they take on a different signification because of the primacy of middle-class Latinidad in the musical.

Miguel Piñero's poem, "La Bodega Sold Dreams" (1980) opens with a first-person voice who aspires to become a cultural creative: "dreamt i was a poet / & / writin' silver sailin' songs."⁷⁵ The appeal of this dream lies in the imagined power of the poet to undo the condition of class oppression that Pietri describes in his poem: "words / strong and powerful crashing' thru / walls of steel & concrete / erected in minds weak / & / those asleep."⁷⁶ The ideal poet persona possesses an authoritative voice that transforms the consciousness of the Latinx population, awakening their minds with new knowledge about their social condition. The poem posits the urban locale of the bodega as an ambivalent space that can facilitate the poet's educational imperative, serving as a marketplace for circulating a liberating counterculture. The Spanglish-inflected words of the "poeta" will establish an alternate economy of ideas, "strikin' a new rush for gold / in las bodegas where our poets' words & songs are sung."⁷⁷ The poet's task is to create a new imaginary for the Latinx barrio and, by extension, a more intellectually sustaining mode of survival. This dream of embodying the poet persona is cut short by a "but" that enumerates the obstacles that stand in the way of the first-person narrator's vision. The "workin' of time / clock / sweatin' / & / swearing' / & / slavin' for the final dime" alludes to the precarious condition of the working poor.⁷⁸ The harsh reality of labor conditions inspires the poem and threatens writerly creativity: "perspiration insultin' poets / pride."⁷⁹ Without the possessive marking the subjects—which reads "poets" instead of "poets'" or "poets'"—this line references sweat as insulting the artistic community's work

as well as the poets' ability to insult and critique the labor situation of U.S. Latinxs. Similarly to Pietri, Piñero's poem is marked by cynicism about the function of work, questioning labor's potential for facilitating class mobility. "La Bodega Sold Dreams" values the work of developing an aesthetic, a vocabulary about mobility that can depict the unique challenges of the Latinx working class, while alluding to how the profit-logic of "slavin' / for the final dime" can undermine the development of that barrio creativity and poetic sensibility.⁸⁰ By the poem's conclusion, the bodega is part of a larger structure of exploitation, one that results in the "poet's dreams / endin' in a factoria as one / in a million / unseen."⁸¹ If the poet's work is circulated by the bodega, then the poem anxiously seems to ask, for what purpose? Nuyorican poetry of the civil rights generation depicts the barrio and its downward mobility as a challenge to U.S. Latinx imagination while also serving as a *source* of creative inspiration. The poetry of Pietri and Piñero reveals that status panic is not merely the providence of the middle class, that the "fear of falling" further down the social hierarchy is an anxiety of the working class as well.⁸² The poetry also identifies the marketplace as an obstacle and vehicle for the progressive political projects of a Nuyorican working-class population. Depending on how the final line of Piñero's poem is read, even the opening dream of becoming a poet is potentially part of an economy of "paper candy" that deadens the imaginations of the Latinx working class.⁸³ Does the final line of "buyin' bodega sold dreams" refer to the narrator as consumer or, equally provocatively, to the reader? The ambivalent relationship of cultural production to the marketplace depends upon imagining the reader as part of the "we" who claim "our poets."⁸⁴ The poetry of Pietri and Piñero envisions a working-class Latinx audience, as opposed to the Broadway context of spectatorship that shapes *In the Heights*. Nevertheless, the icon of the bodega as a space of community, consumption, and economic exchange is revisited by the musical, imagining how the song of a bodega owner can give voice to the struggles and dreams of a U.S. Latinx middle class.

MIDDLE-CLASS MOBILITY DREAMS: THE SONGS OF "IN THE HEIGHTS" AND "96,000"

I turn to the opening song of *In the Heights* to analyze how the musical populates its barrio, constructs the relationship between the bodega and the community, and imagines a shared concern that connects the members of

the barrio together. The song "In the Heights" introduces the bodega owner, Usnavi,⁸⁵ performing the first task of the workday, opening shop "at the break of" dawn and encountering "this little punk I gotta chase away."⁸⁶ The synopsis from the 2008 Broadway cast recording describes Usnavi's nemesis more generously as "a young man [who] sprays graffiti onto a bodega awning" and whose "artistic reverie" is interrupted by the business owner. While the libretto does not describe the confrontation using these terms, it confirms Graffiti Pete's identity as "an artist."⁸⁷ Graffiti Pete is "revealed painting various walls in the neighborhood" and responds, "Pshh," when Usnavi yells, "Yo, that's my wall."⁸⁸ The musical opens with two competing creative visions, with the graffiti from the working-class streets placed at odds with the "welcome to the neighborhood" song by the middle-class bodega owner. Graffiti Pete is successfully banished from the song's articulation of community, and along with it the alternative vision of the neighborhood that his art might embody and provide. The imaginary of Usnavi's song is born out of a need to distinguish the work of the bodega from the antiestablishment and supposedly delinquent labor of the graffiti artist, which challenges Usnavi's claim to property ownership. In Usnavi's signature song, we can hear some significant parallels between Nuyorican performance poetry and the anthem "In the Heights." The barrio remains a place of economic challenges, where there are "endless debts"⁸⁹ "bounce[d] checks,"⁹⁰ and "bills to pay."⁹¹ However, the cast of characters who "struggle in the barrio"⁹² are now described as the owners of the bodega, the cab company, the salon, and even the piragua cart. In this population, "everybody's got a job" and "got a dream,"⁹³ a dream that is informed by a middle-class context of privilege, such as the financial challenges of sending a daughter (Nina) to college (and to Stanford, no less!).⁹⁴ Usnavi articulates the history, shared struggles, and horizon of this middle-class community, explaining that "my parents came with nothing. / They got a little more. / And sure, we're poor, but yo, / at least we got the store."⁹⁵ While offering a chronology of immigrant upward mobility, Usnavi aligns this middle-class existence with poverty. This metaphorical poverty is an expression of status panic; Usnavi is referencing a contemporary narrative in the United States about the disappearance or stagnation of the middle class. Such narratives rarely acknowledge how communities of color might experience this phenomenon, or the tax of racial oppression that they still pay for upward mobility. The musical's chorus reaffirms Usnavi's crossover vision of pan-Latinx solidarity by repeating that they and their families also come "from miles away."⁹⁶

After introducing himself as an immigrant from the Dominican Republic, Usnavi encounters a second set of challenges to the enterprise of the bodega: a broken fridge during a heat wave. Losing the ability to keep the milk cold for the coffee threatens the capitalist logic of the bodega business, "cuz I'm not makin' any profit / if the coffee isn't light and sweet."⁹⁷ The relationship of the bodega to the community of Washington Heights consists of providing coffee: when the chorus declares "in the heights / I can't survive without café," Usnavi responds, "I serve café."⁹⁸ Framed as essential to survival in the neighborhood, coffee symbolizes a rerooting via cultural consumption—Abuela Celia's solution to the broken fridge is her "mother's old recipe" of "one can of condensed milk."⁹⁹ At the same time, coffee also represents an addiction to decontextualization as a strategy for enduring the rat race of economic competition. The chorus asserts that "in the Heights / I buy my coffee and I go / set my sights / on only what I need to know."¹⁰⁰ The call and response between the chorus and Usnavi locates him as the authoritative voice that will articulate what knowledge is necessary for survival—a role that recalls Piñero's poet persona. Usnavi offers his customers a community identity that is working class in construct, despite the middle-class economics of business ownership: "we came to work and to live and we got a lot in common."¹⁰¹ The pan-Latinx unity that Usnavi envisions is based in a present tense existence and ownership of Washington Heights, declaring that "today's all we got, so we cannot stop, / this is our block."¹⁰² The motivation for middle-class struggle is a shared horizon of "the day that we go from / poverty to stock options."¹⁰³ The bodega is the center of a barrio ethos that glosses over the past and present of immigrant poverty in order to endorse a communal project of continued upward mobility. The logical conclusion to this American Dream of "In the Heights" is Usnavi as an absent owner like the businessmen in Pietri's poem: "one day I'll be on a beach / with Sonny writing checks / to me."¹⁰⁴ The tourist-exile fantasy is undercut during the course of the musical, with Usnavi deciding that he would rather assert his belonging in Washington Heights than enable the gentrification of the barrio by becoming one of "them." Usnavi becomes a "reformed character," analogous to Román's assessment of Evie Gomez in Michele Serros's novel *Honey Blond Chica*: a protagonist who turns away from idealizing "the leisure-class habits of immobility and waste" to adopting "a bourgeois ethic of personal drive and perseverance."¹⁰⁵ Ironically, it is the lottery winnings that facilitate this reformation, rather than the hard work of running the bodega itself.

The activist overtones of this happy ending, which redefines the privilege of upward mobility as standing ground rather than moving up and out, is complicated by the way the song "In the Heights" imagines the relationship to the theater community, underscoring some key contradictions of the middle-class anxiety about gentrification. Usnavi directly addresses his white listeners by sympathizing with their fears about entering diverse ethno-scapes like Washington Heights: "Now, you're probably thinkin', 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."¹⁰⁶ Usnavi acknowledges his theater audience's ignorance of the barrio locale, as opposed to the experiential knowledge of his customers. Referencing Duke Ellington's rendition of "You Must Take the A Train," Usnavi positions himself as a translator for the Broadway audience, instructing them on how to overcome their (racist and classist) prejudices to discover the forbidden and exotic spaces within New York City. Usnavi frames his work as narrator and bodega owner in terms of possessing the authority to speak for the concerns and dreams of both barrio and Broadway populations. Emphasizing the reeducation of the theater audience, Usnavi warns "I hope you're writing this down, I'm gonna test ya later. / I'm getting tested times are tough on this bodega."¹⁰⁷ By claiming that he will test their acquisition of knowledge, Usnavi asks the audience to see the musical as an opportunity for expanding their horizons. Encouraging them to venture into the barrio as tourists with himself as guide, Usnavi articulates another layer of shared community, an alliance based on the communal struggle of "the test:" challenges to the mainstream audience's socioeconomic and racial boundaries are equated with the economic testing of Latinx small businesses. However, with the audience positioned as ethnic outsiders, they also potentially feed into the gentrification that already threatens the "dime-a-dozen / mom-and-pop stop-and-shop."¹⁰⁸ The direct address to the audience is followed by an explanation of how the U.S. Latinx middle class is being pushed out of the barrio: "Two months ago somebody bought Ortega's / (*Points to the salon.*) Our neighbors started packin' up and pickin' up / and ever since the rents went up / it's gotten mad expensive."¹⁰⁹ The "somebody" who is able to afford the rising cost of living in northern Manhattan functions as the Broadway audience's double, hinting at another layer of power dynamics between Usnavi and the theater's spectators. The references to the audience also acknowledge the production context of the Broadway musical. Similarly to the ethnic sitcoms that Román examines, *In the Heights* is

"constrained not just by genre conventions but also by the management of ethnic differences by white financiers" and producers.¹¹⁰

The 1960s iconography of the lottery returns in the musical as a shared investment in the hope for upward mobility. In "Puerto Rican Obituary" (1969), Pedro Pietri depicts the Nuyorican community as the living dead, stuck in a liminal space because of the American Dream's empty promises. In the poem, the lottery industry is an institution that promotes the propaganda of economic uplift as within reach of the working class: "All died / dreaming about america / waking them up in the middle of the night / screaming: Mira Mira / your name is on the winning lottery ticket."¹¹¹ The characters suffer a purgatory defined by debt and underemployment all the while hoping for a means of upward mobility, for their "number to hit"¹¹² or to win the "irish sweepstakes"¹¹³ so that they can access the privilege of ownership and mobility, for example, "a trip to Puerto Rico."¹¹⁴ The desperation is such that even the dead are called to task, to "help those who you left behind / find financial peace of mind" by telling them "the correct number to play"¹¹⁵ The song "96,000" from *In the Heights* maps out a U.S. Latinx community's lottery dreams with some parallels to Pietri's poem, namely, the hope for liberation from a cycle of pointless labor, a future that promises "no breakin' your neck for respect or a paycheck."¹¹⁶ Additionally, the musical references a materialism that reinforces the debt trade, with a character fantasizing about starting "my life with a brand-new lease / Atlantic City with a Malibu Breeze."¹¹⁷ Diverging from the Nuyorican poetry of the civil rights generation, "96,000" incorporates a set of perspectives that convey alternate avenues for spending the lottery winnings, from an individualist "Donald Trump" business school model¹¹⁸ to a sixties activist community project that will "finally fix housin' / give the barrio computers," teach children "about gentrification,"¹¹⁹ and "invest in protest."¹²⁰ These apparently contradictory values, of individualist capitalist success versus progressive social justice projects, are placed on a continuum via the lottery industry. In so doing, *In the Heights* acknowledges a civil-rights-era model of an activist poetics as well as the contemporary realities of a city that is quickly gentrifying and dominated by the Wall Street banking class. The different voices that articulate their lottery dreams eventually coalesce by the end of the song, with the group emphasizing that with the financial award "we could pay off the debts we owe."¹²¹ The final declaration of a unified shared concern in terms of freedom from debt is representative of how the musical adapts the signifiers of Nuyorican poetry and its vision of U.S. Latinx working-class struggles. The

musical articulates the ways in which the vision or horizon of U.S. Latinx cultural creatives has changed since the sixties, where the concerns centered on the inner city and white flight, to the contemporary historical moment of a rapidly gentrifying city that increasingly caters only to elites. The racial tax remains, functioning as "a reminder that no matter their class standing, they still have lower status" and the Latinx middle class is vulnerable to rising living costs.¹²² I'll return to discussing this dynamic between the civil rights and millennial generations in the next section about the musical's song "Blackout."

FROM PUNKS TO PROPERTY POLICE: THE SONG "BLACKOUT"

The winning lottery ticket goes to Abuela Claudia in *In the Heights*, and upon her death, the money eventually is redistributed to all the besieged business owners in the barrio. The fantasy of "96,000" and its dream of upward mobility out of debt thus is depicted as an attainable reality. These business owners continue to face a threat from without, the implicitly white gentrification of the neighborhood, and a threat from within, for example, the graffiti "punk" that Usnavi has to chase away—an internal threat that becomes allegorized in the blackout scene that takes place at the climax of the musical.

The song "Blackout" interrupts the crossover aesthetics of the musical by acknowledging the menace that the working poor pose to the upward mobility dreams of the Latinx middle class. While this disadvantaged barrio population remains at a distance, the blackout scene alludes to the status panic that lies at the heart of the musical's model minority narrative. The fictional neighborhood's loss of power has two historical referents, the August 14, 2003 power surge that caused a blackout across the Northeast Corridor and the July 13, 1977 so-called night of terror where New York City lost power due to a lightning strike. The more contemporary blackout was, frankly, uneventful, since there was less crime reported during the 2003 power outage than during the same time frame the previous year. The 1977 blackout, however, occurred at night during a heat wave and in a city whose joblessness rate had reached 1930s Depression era levels. New York City was in a recession and declared bankruptcy in 1976, leading to steep cuts in social services, especially those serving poor communities. The loss of electricity

led to looting, with images of people tearing the grates off of storefronts televised throughout the nation. Thousands of people were arrested during the blackout, so many that they had to be processed at Yankee Stadium. The blackout cemented the image of 1970s New York City as “dangerous” and “broke,”¹²³ a chaotic space produced by governmental and commercial disinvestment (for example, the spectacle of the Bronx burning during a Yankees game or of the famous *New York Post* headline of President Gerald Ford telling the city to drop dead) and whose deterioration was accelerated by white flight to the suburbs.

While *In the Heights* is set in the 2000s, the blackout scene evokes the violence, fear, and stereotyping associated with the 1977 incident. Similar to how the autobiographical context of Inwood is mapped onto the geographic and symbolic space of Washington Heights,¹²⁴ the song “Blackout” strategically distances the contemporary present from the past (in other words, it is not a flashback to that specific historical period) while also acknowledging the symbolic inheritances that continue to inform depictions of Latinidad for mainstream audiences. The ghost of urban poverty and unrest haunts the musical’s imaginary of Latinidad, temporarily questioning and undermining the upward mobility narrative of lottery winnings. In so doing, the musical acknowledges the limitations of its vision of pan-Latinidad for crossover consumption, a Latinidad that is transcultural in its articulation but that remains uniquely raced and class-specific. The song “Blackout” acts as the most explicit depiction and expression of status panic in the show. The images of destroyed storefronts returns from the perspective of middle-class Latinxs, with Usnavi’s bodega suffering a slashed awning and broken window¹²⁵ as well as “a stolen register.”¹²⁶ The references to the crime wave, “with people lootin’ and shootin’,”¹²⁷ strategically resignify the blackout so that it speaks to the concerns of middle-class Latinxs and imagines an alliance with the street via the upward mobility and assimilation of Graffiti Pete. Usnavi, the Piragua Guy, Camila the co-owner of the Rosario Car Service, and Daniela, the owner of the salon, are all desperately trying to either protect their property or find somebody who will do so in their absence. The chorus of “Blackout” repeats “we are powerless,” revisiting the civil rights language of economic disempowerment of working-class Latinxs. However, this phrase positions the business class as victims to the invisible hordes of the poor whose criminality threatens their livelihood. The blackout presents a crisis of vulnerability for the U.S. Latinx middle class, one that exposes their fear of the working-class communities they serve. Ironically, it is the 1977

blackout that is credited with providing the first generation of hip-hop artists with access to the technology necessary to produce the very genre that inspires *In the Heights*. Furman describes the musical as reflecting a “tapestry of music” that can be heard “walking from 181st to 191st in the neighborhood,” including “the rap blaring from the boom boxes strapped to bicycles.”¹²⁸ The crossover success of hip-hop musicality on Broadway originates in the rise of hip-hop during the 1970s, an emergence that early practitioners connect to the 1977 blackout providing extraordinary (albeit temporary) access to the means of production for this musical genre. In *Yes Yes Y’all: The Experience Music Project Oral History of Hip-Hop’s First Decade*, Grandmaster Caz recalls obtaining a “new mixer and turntable”¹²⁹ during the blackout, while U.S. Latinx DJ Disco Wiz argues that “before the blackout, you had about maybe five legitimate crews of DJs. After the blackout, you had a DJ on every block. . . . That blackout made a big spark in the hip-hop revolution.”¹³⁰ The blackout scene is therefore key to the crossover aesthetics of *In the Heights* in that it indirectly references the cultural heritage that shapes its creative imagination and was produced by working-class populations. The song “Blackout” depicts a present-day crisis of property ownership for the middle-class Latinxs in the neighborhood as much as it symbolically references a past where a similar crisis provided the working poor of New York City with access to the technology to create rap and hip-hop as well as find a new (mainstream) public.

The musical also depicts the blackout as a moment of opportunity, with the loss of power setting the stage for a new alliance between working- and middle-class Latinxs. Graffiti Pete chooses to help Sonny protect Usnavi’s bodega, marshaling fireworks to “distract the vandals.”¹³¹ Sonny also linguistically aligns Graffiti Pete with the business class by declaring “I see some thugs comin’. Man, we gonna get jacked up!”¹³² The transformation of this character from a street punk who disrespects personal property to a guardian of the bodega is accomplished via his incorporation into the capitalist economy. Sonny takes his winnings from the lottery and presents Graffiti Pete with “a business proposition.”¹³³ Not only do they both fix the grate on the bodega, but Sonny pays Graffiti Pete to paint “a huge graffiti mural of Abuela Claudia that says *paciencia y fe*.”¹³⁴ The rags-to-riches miracle of the lottery enables Sonny to pay Graffiti Pete for his artistic labor. Presented with this memorial as the artistic rehabilitation of the bodega’s security system, Usnavi changes his mind about selling the store as well as his evaluation of the “punk.”¹³⁵ Usnavi tells Graffiti Pete that he’s “got a job,” presenting

him with “some money” to “finish up” the mural.¹³⁶ Street art, previously on the margins of the barrio’s public in the musical and outside of its capitalist logic, is now on a legitimate and respectable career path. The antagonism that was evident at the start of the musical between Usnavi and Graffiti Pete vanishes. The street and the business classes are unified by the artistic project of securing the bodega, rebuilding it so that it withstands the threats of downward mobility and gentrification. The musical incorporation of hip-hop into the Broadway genre of the musical is therefore an expression of this crossover aesthetic, which aims to merge the different ethnic and class-specific strains of U.S. Latinx cultural production in order to imagine a pan-Latinx affiliation via the market. Just as the inspiration of Graffiti Pete’s mural is working class, in the figure of Abuela Claudia, so is the hip-hop popular culture that gives voice to the musical. At the core of the middle-class aesthetic of *In the Heights* is a project of intraethnic solidarity that is ambivalent about the means by which such solidarity is achieved. The musical credits a lottery prize for the upward mobility of both Graffiti Pete and Usnavi, which is essentially Wall Street speculation sung in a minor key. Since the characters’ hopes are invested in a game of chance, the musical offers an unlikely path for others to follow and find solidarity in the face of systemic oppression and racism. *In the Heights* instead emphasizes the provisionality of intraethnic collaboration via this once-in-a-million opportunity.

CONCLUSION

In his historiography of U.S. Latinx theater, Sandoval-Sánchez concisely remarks on the key shifts and distinguishing features of the post-sixties era. “[M]any professional U.S. Latinos/as” understand that for “mainstream productions the act must be cleaned up when the curtain rises.”¹³⁷ The sanitized representation of Latinidad means that plays “are not written for barrio audiences . . . and their concerns” and their emplotment often “promote hegemonic middle class values and silence the dramatic plots of ‘ghetto’ realities.”¹³⁸ Does *In the Heights* exemplify “hegemonic middle class values” in this sense? My answer is yes and no. Yes, inasmuch as the musical privileges the concerns of a U.S. Latinx middle class and therefore does not explicitly address a working-class or “ghetto” perspective. Yes, because it does imagine and invoke a non-Latinx audience, a mainstream Broadway spectatorship. And yes, the emplotment of the musical posits a trajectory of

successful upward mobility. However, I temper this assessment by arguing that the categorization of “hegemonic middle-class values” doesn’t tell the whole story about this musical’s crossover aesthetics. Román’s work, for example, suggests that contemporary minority artists in the United States are producing a culture of mobility, one that wrestles with the impossibility of meeting hegemonic expectations for middle-class subjectivities. The references to a Nuyorican civil rights imaginary reveal that the “barrio experience and political/social agenda” are central to how contemporary U.S. Latinx cultural creatives negotiate their positionality within the mainstream. Even as the pressures of crossing over onto Broadway may lead to the displacement of working-class subjectivities, the discursive inheritance from those cultural precursors cannot be erased. *In the Heights* is haunted by the voices it cannot integrate into its narrative of middle-class mobility while it is also indebted to the language of working class-struggle, which allows it to articulate the economic challenges that the U.S. Latinx middle class faces, such as the rising costs of living in terms of real estate (gentrification) and access to education. Usnavi imagines that “in five years, this whole city’s rich folks and hipsters”¹³⁹ will become a dead-end horizon that threatens middle-class Latinidad. As the bodega migrates to the Broadway stage, the civil rights vocabulary and imaginary of Nuyorican experience is adapted to articulate the concerns and anxieties of contemporary U.S. Latinx middle-class cultural creatives. *In the Heights* speaks to the creative conflict that these artists encounter and engage as they produce new narratives of mobility—the inherent tension between the ethical imperative to avoid mainstream stereotypes of Latinidad while also seeking to depict the multifaceted diversity of this U.S. ethnic community.

Notes

1. Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez, José, *Can You See? Latinos on and off Broadway* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), 107.
2. Lin-Manuel Miranda and Quiara Alegría Hudes, *In the Heights* (Milwaukee: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2013), 118.
3. Sandoval-Sánchez, José, 119.
4. Sandoval-Sánchez, José, 118.
5. Elda María Román, *Race and Upward Mobility: Seeking, Gatekeeping, and Other Class Strategies in Postwar America* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), 135.
6. Jill Furman, Introduction to *In the Heights* by Lin-Manuel Miranda and Quiara Alegría Hudes (Milwaukee: Applause Theatre and Cinema Books, 2013), xi.

7. Sandoval-Sánchez, *José*, 115.
8. Sandoval-Sánchez, *José*, 115.
9. Furman, "Introduction," xi.
10. Furman, "Introduction," xi.
11. Furman, "Introduction," ix.
12. Furman, "Introduction," ix.
13. Robert Hofler, "The Groundbreakers: Legit," *Variety Magazine* 9 (October 2008): A23.
14. Hofler, "Groundbreakers," A23.
15. Campbell Robertson, "You're 27. Here are Millions to Stage Your Musical," *New York Times*, February 18, 2007, A9.
16. Robertson, "You're 27," A9.
17. Robertson, "You're 27," A9.
18. Robertson, "You're 27," A9.
19. Robertson, "You're 27," A9.
20. Robertson, "You're 27," A9.
21. Robertson, "You're 27," A9.
22. Román, *Race*, 1.
23. Román, *Race*, 3.
24. Román, *Race*, 3-4.
25. Román, *Race*, 17.
26. Ramón Grosfoguel, *Colonial Subjects: Puerto Ricans in a Global Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 108.
27. Grosfoguel, *Colonial*, 109.
28. Grosfoguel, *Colonial*, 110.
29. Brian Hiatt, "'Hamilton': Meet the Man behind Broadway's Hip-Hop Masterpiece," *Rolling Stone Magazine* 29 (September 2015), accessed January 7, 2016. <http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/features/hamilton-meet-the-man-behind-broadways-hip-hop-masterpiece-20150929?page=2>
30. Kathleen Potts, interview with Quiara Alegría Hudes, "Water by the Spoonful," *Guernica* 2 (July 2012), accessed January 4, 2016. <https://www.guernicamag.com/interviews/water-by-the-spoonful/>
31. Potts, Interview.
32. Román, *Race*, 18.
33. Román, *Race*, 11.
34. Román, *Race*, 18.
35. Román, *Race*, 18.
36. Hiatt, "Hamilton."
37. Hiatt, "Hamilton."
38. Rembert Brown, "Genius: A Conversation with *Hamilton* Maestro Lin-Manuel Miranda," *Skewed & Reviewed* 29 (September 2015), accessed January 7, 2016, <http://>

- grantland.com/hollywood-prospectus/genius-a-conversation-with-hamilton-maestro-lin-manuel-miranda/
39. Brown, "Genius."
40. THNKR, "Les Mis Inspires Creator of *In the Heights!*" *YouTube*, January 17, 2013, accessed January 7, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aewv9UKEYkk>
41. Alexis Greene, "No Place Like Home: Quiara Alegría Hudes Tells a Philadelphia Story All Her Own," *Theatre Communications Group* (October 2008). Accessed January 4, 2016, <https://www.tcg.org/publications/at/oct08/hudes.cfm>
42. Potts, interview.
43. Greene, "No Place Like Home." Hudes's children's book, *Welcome to My Neighborhood! A Barrio ABC* (2010), provides unique insight into her vision of a working-class U.S. Latinx barrio.
44. Greene, "No Place Like Home."
45. Potts, interview.
46. THNKR, "Les Mis."
47. THNKR, "Les Mis."
48. Brown, "Genius."
49. Greene, "No Place Like Home."
50. Furman, "Introduction," ix.
51. Greene, "No Place Like Home." Hudes describes her stepfather as "a total businessman" and reveals that "[t]he father who owns the taxi stand in *In the Heights* is kind of modeled after" her stepfather.
52. Furman, "Introduction," x.
53. Sandoval-Sánchez, *José*, 116.
54. Sandoval-Sánchez, *José*, 116.
55. Román, *Race*, 7.
56. Juan Flores, *From Bomba to Hi-Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 178.
57. Flores, *From Bomba*, 179.
58. For a discussion of Pietri's theatrical writing, see David Crespy, "A Nuyorican Absurdist: Pedro Pietri and His Plays of Happy Subversion," *Latin American Theatre Review* 45.2 (2012): 25-43.
59. For a comparative analysis of the Broadway reception of *Short Eyes* and *Zoot Suit*, see Ashley Lucas, "Prisoners on the Great White Way: *Short Eyes* and *Zoot Suit* as the First U.S. Latina/o Plays on Broadway," *Latin American Theatre Review* 43.1 (2009): 121-35.
60. The official website for the Nuyorican Poets Café provides an extensive list of its poet founders: <http://www.nuyorican.org/history-and-awards/>
61. Pedro Pietri, *Pedro Pietri: Selected Poetry*, ed. Juan Flores and Pedro López Adorno (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2015), 13.
62. Pietri, *Selected Poetry*, 13.

63. Pietri, *Selected Poetry*, 13.
 64. Pietri, *Selected Poetry*, 13.
 65. Pietri, *Selected Poetry*, 14.
 66. Pietri, *Selected Poetry*, 15.
 67. Pietri, *Selected Poetry*, 16.
 68. Pietri, *Selected Poetry*, 14.
 69. Pietri, *Selected Poetry*, 14.
 70. Pietri, *Selected Poetry*, 14.
 71. Pietri, *Selected Poetry*, 16.
 72. Pietri, *Selected Poetry*, 16–17.
 73. Pietri, *Selected Poetry*, 17.
 74. The official website for Café Bustelo (<http://www.cafebustelo.com/en/cafе-bustelo-history/>) provides an intriguing history of the brand's origins, which includes the migration of the first owner from Spain to Cuba to Puerto Rico and finally to East Harlem, El Barrio, where the business officially got its first start.
 75. Miguel Piñero, *La Bodega Sold Dreams* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1985), 5.
 76. Piñero, *La Bodega*, 5.
 77. Piñero, *La Bodega*, 5.
 78. Piñero, *La Bodega*, 5.
 79. Piñero, *La Bodega*, 6.
 80. Piñero, *La Bodega*, 5.
 81. Piñero, *La Bodega*, 6.
 82. Román, *Race*, 153.
 83. Piñero, *La Bodega*, 5.
 84. Piñero, *La Bodega*, 5.
 85. The name of Usnavi evokes the title and main character of Pedro Juan Soto's *Us-mail* (1959; English translation, Sombrero Publishing, 2007). Soto's novel is set on the island of Vieques during the controversial establishment of a U.S. Navy base. The name Usnavi places emphasis on the U.S. military control of Puerto Rico and its economy, and by extension the island nation's lack of self-determination in terms of its (in)ability to patrol its borders and facilitate trade.
 86. Miranda and Hudes, *In the Heights*, 1.
 87. Miranda and Hudes, *In the Heights*, xv.
 88. Miranda and Hudes, *In the Heights*, 1.
 89. Miranda and Hudes, *In the Heights*, 4.
 90. Miranda and Hudes, *In the Heights*, 7.
 91. Miranda and Hudes, *In the Heights*, 4.
 92. Miranda and Hudes, *In the Heights*, 4.
 93. Miranda and Hudes, *In the Heights*, 7.
 94. Miranda and Hudes, *In the Heights*, 4.
 95. Miranda and Hudes, *In the Heights*, 12.

96. Miranda and Hudes, *In the Heights*, 12, 13.
 97. Miranda and Hudes, *In the Heights*, 2.
 98. Miranda and Hudes, *In the Heights*, 4.
 99. Miranda and Hudes, *In the Heights*, 3.
 100. Miranda and Hudes, *In the Heights*, 7.
 101. Miranda and Hudes, *In the Heights*, 12.
 102. Miranda and Hudes, *In the Heights*, 13.
 103. Miranda and Hudes, *In the Heights*, 12.
 104. Miranda and Hudes, *In the Heights*, 12.
 105. Román, *Race*, 153.
 106. Miranda and Hudes, *In the Heights*, 3.
 107. Miranda and Hudes, *In the Heights*, 3.
 108. Miranda and Hudes, *In the Heights*, 6–7.
 109. Miranda and Hudes, *In the Heights*, 3–4.
 110. Román, *Race*, 148.
 111. Pietri, *Selected Poetry*, 4.
 112. Pietri, *Selected Poetry*, 5.
 113. Pietri, *Selected Poetry*, 7.
 114. Pietri, *Selected Poetry*, 7.
 115. Pietri, *Selected Poetry*, 8.
 116. Miranda and Hudes, *In the Heights*, 50.
 117. Miranda and Hudes, *In the Heights*, 50.
 118. Miranda and Hudes, *In the Heights*, 48.
 119. Miranda and Hudes, *In the Heights*, 52.
 120. Miranda and Hudes, *In the Heights*, 52.
 121. Miranda and Hudes, *In the Heights*, 58.
 122. Román, *Race*, 11.
 123. Reporting on photojournalist Bolívar Arellano, Dana Farrington writes, "In the raging 1970s, New York City was dangerous, broke and at times on fire. Latinos in the city were taking to the streets, running for office and carving out artistic spaces. 'Latino' at the time in New York meant 'Puerto Rican.'" Farrington, "Photographing Puerto Rican New York, with a 'Sympathetic Eye,'" *National Public Radio* (October 26, 2013), accessed January 28, 2016, <http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/10/26/231704827/photographing-puerto-rican-new-york-with-a-sympathetic-eye>
 124. Miranda rationalizes this distance by stating that "[i]t's a case where the song 'In the Heights' finds the musical. . . I wasn't going to write, 'In Inwood'" (Hofler, "Groundbreakers," A23).
 125. Miranda and Hudes, *In the Heights*, 101.
 126. Miranda and Hudes, *In the Heights*, 102.
 127. Miranda and Hudes, *In the Heights*, 89.
 128. Furman, "Introduction," x.

129. Jim Fricke and Charlie Ahearn, *Yes Yes Y'all: The Experience Music Project Oral History of Hip-Hop's First Decade* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002), 130.
130. Fricke and Ahearn, *Yes Yes Y'all*, 131.
131. Miranda and Hudes, *In the Heights*, 90.
132. Miranda and Hudes, *In the Heights*, 90.
133. Miranda and Hudes, *In the Heights*, 146.
134. Miranda and Hudes, *In the Heights*, 150.
135. Miranda and Hudes, *In the Heights*, 150.
136. Miranda and Hudes, *In the Heights*, 151.
137. Sandoval-Sánchez, José, 119.
138. Sandoval-Sánchez, José, 119.
139. Miranda and Hudes, *In the Heights*, 150.

CHAPTER 8

The Dialectics of Presence and Futurity in the Contemporary U.S. Latino/a Novel

Mathias Nilges

In his 2014 essay "The Future as Form," Marcial González draws our attention to an important and thus far underappreciated aspect of the contemporary U.S. ethnic novel: its formal mediation of "a migration not only toward or away from a geographical place or a geopolitical sense of community, but across the temporalities of history itself."¹ González reads these formal strategies in the novel and the histories (the importance of the plural should be noted here) that they attempt to render legible as a way to challenge a trend in the contemporary American novel that amounts to what Fredric Jameson calls "an immense privileging of the present."² González isolates this suggestion from a 2012 lecture by Jameson delivered at the University of California, Berkeley, in which Jameson suggested that we ought to understand this privileging of the present as connected to a larger crisis of futurity: "We seem to have forgotten the ability to conceptualize the future in our contemporary historical moment. We find it easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism."³ And while Jameson's suggestion certainly strikes us as both timely and important, this argument has in fact been one of the underlying propositions that has for quite a few years now informed his work. Already in his 1994 book *The Seeds of Time*, Jameson argues that "it seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism; perhaps due to some weakness in our imagination."⁴ What better proof of this weakness in our imagination, one may not altogether facetiously note, that critical discourse is still wrestling with the implications of this suggestion? After