

Resisting Gentrification in Quiara Alegría Hudes and Lin-Manuel Miranda's *In the Heights* and Ernesto Quiñonez's *Bodega Dreams*

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Introduction

As housing and changes in land use regulations have increased, long-term working-class residents in Latinx¹ neighborhoods, or barrios, have been displaced to make way for affluent middle-class residents—a process known as gentrification. Through an examination of Lin-Manuel Miranda and Quiara Alegría Hudes's play *In the Heights* as well as Ernesto Quiñonez's novel *Bodega Dreams*, this article sheds light on the importance of community networks necessary in combating high levels of poverty and general lack of resources due to private, state, and federal disinvestment. It is my argument that multi-generational Latinx communities (re)assert their lived space—specific to the manner in which actual residents define and navigate the barrio on a daily basis—through the planning and construction of memorial murals. While gentrification displaces long-term working-class Latinx residents, memorial murals function as a means of affirming the collective history of the barrio, depicting shared struggles and lived experiences. Faced with minimal, if any, economic and political capital, residents often turn to alternative means to compensate for socioeconomic stratification and the conditions that breed economic neglect. The texts function as representational examples of the challenges associated with gentrification. This includes disinvestment in working-class neighbor-

hoods by governmental agencies, lack of affordable and safe housing, and increased levels of violence that many times plague low-income neighborhoods.

Confronting Gentrification: Building on Lived Experiences in the Barrio

Hudes, Miranda, and Quiñonez build from lived experiences, having grown up in working-class barrios. *In the Heights* depicts Miranda's childhood barrio, Inwood, located directly adjacent to Washington Heights, the setting of the play. Miranda began writing the play when he was in college. However, before its Broadway debut the play underwent significant changes². It was not until he met Thomas Kail, the future Broadway director of the play, that Miranda was introduced to Quiara Alegría Hudes, a prominent writer who was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 2012. The collaboration gave birth to the final Latinx influenced/hip-hop version of *In the Heights*, drawing its inspiration from Hudes's children's book *Welcome to My Neighborhood! A Barrio ABC*.³ The book centers on a little girl who takes her best friend on a tour of her barrio that is riddled with disinvestment. For example, "A" is for "abandoned car."⁴ Set in North Philadelphia, the city where Hudes and most of her family reside, the book reflects the Latinx demographic as well as the financial and economic challenges echoed in the play. Hudes's inspiration builds from her own background with poverty as the daughter of a Puerto Rican mother and Jewish father.⁵ Miranda and Hudes stand in a unique position in that they have written the only successful Latinx play to be performed on Broadway, written by a Latinx about the Latinx experience, specifically with respect to gentrification.⁶ Opening to great reviews, the play would later go on to win the Tony Award for the best musical in 2008.⁷

Like Miranda and Hudes's play, Ernesto Quiñonez's novel is set in New York City, specifically in Spanish Harlem, the barrio where he spent most of his childhood. Of Ecuadorian and Puerto Rican descent, Quiñonez was brought to Spanish Harlem at eighteen months of age by his parents, who would spend most of their lives in low-wage factory jobs. *Bodega Dreams* speaks directly to the daily hardships of poverty in the form of benign neglect and disinvestment of the barrio. As a result, residents often direct their attention to alternative means for generating income.

Bodega Dreams takes place in Spanish Harlem and follows the story of Julio Mercado (nickname Chino), a young protagonist and memorial mural artist, who is married to the beautiful Blanca.⁸ Julio works part-time at the local supermarket while attending school. He also paints memorial murals—for a fee—of those who have passed away in the barrio. Despite these numerous jobs, he is still struggling to make ends meet until he meets Willie Bodega. A lucrative and quixotic drug lord, Bodega dreams of an idealistic future for Spanish Harlem and its residents. He takes interest in Julio because he is obsessed with Blanca's aunt, Vera, his first love. Bodega then recruits Julio into his clandestine business

to help him build the economic capital he needs to provide for himself and his family. Well aware of his questionable position, Julio justifies his work with Bodega for the “greater good.” All of Bodega’s profits are invested back into the neighborhood—renovating buildings and providing business and school loans to the neighborhood’s brightest. After learning he is in too deep, Julio attempts to sever ties with Bodega. In response, recognizing the gravity of the situation, Blanca leaves Julio. Tensions continue to rise as the author reveals Vera’s return to the barrio with her long-time wealthy Cuban husband. Bodega almost immediately attempts to get her back. Vera seemingly responds. Determined to run off together, Vera shoots her husband after he refuses to let her leave him and Bodega takes the blame for Vera. As he is walking to the police station to turn himself in, he is shot and killed by an unknown shooter. In a twisted love triangle, Vera set up Bodega and is in love with Nazario, Bodega’s lawyer and long-time business partner. Bodega is hailed a hero and deeply mourned by Spanish Harlem as the hope for a better barrio dies with him. His reputation, however, endures presumably with Julio in the continued effort to fight against gentrification.

Spatial Apartheid

Numerous scholars have written on the topic of gentrification in Latinx neighborhoods. Arlene Dávila is arguably the most widely known and recognized, centering her work on New York City boroughs via empowerment zone or urban “revitalization” programs. On a federal and state level, for example, legislation has required local community organizations to provide annual reports, financial records, and a business plan—a requirement to apply for governmental funds that even few thirty-year-old organizations could meet.⁹ This further contributes to the elimination of already limited resources, impacting primarily long-term working-class residents and breeding displacement. Raúl Villa in *Barrio-Logos: Space and Place in Urban Chicano Literature and Culture* makes a similar argument rooted in southern California barrios with a focus on Chicanxs.¹⁰ Like New York City, the social space of Los Angeles has been defined through physical regulation via land use restrictions and the social control of space, such as through policing and surveillance. Ideological, educational, and informational apparatuses serve as a means of further controlling how the spaces of the barrio are navigated. This, in turn, places Latinxs in a position of Anglo-controlled capital, a phenomenon that is echoed in the literary critiques of the texts.¹¹

Historically, Anglo-centric labels on Latinx literature have been persistent. Literary scholar June Dwyer discusses this phenomenon by defining *Bodega Dreams* as a modern-day rendition of *The Great Gatsby*, especially with respect to the narrative of the American dream—a biased assumption, as she notes, that implies the “white middle-class male” as the standard. Similarly, El Teatro Campesino (Farm Workers Theater), known for its improvisational theater and

as a pivotal arm of the Chicano Movement, was dubbed as distinctly Brechtian, named after German playwright and theater director Bertolt Brecht. Brecht was known for improvisational theater rooted in political rhetoric.¹² While there are parallelisms with Brecht, it is clear that members of the theater troupe did not study Brecht specifically; instead they were motivated by the distinct challenges Chicana Latinx communities faced. The need to attach an Anglo-centered label to Latinx literature, as Dwyer points out, problematizes the category of American as exclusive to “white middle-class male.”¹³ In this respect, the term “American” is limited and based on individualistic paradigms of identity that fail to take into account cultural identity as heterogeneous. Elías Domínguez-Barajas takes the argument a step further by first and foremost recognizing lived ethnic experience as fundamental in the work of Ernesto Quiñonez.¹⁴ While Domínguez-Barajas recognizes the importance of ethnicity at the center of one’s worldview, it is critical to include the importance of weighing in race, class, ethnicity, and gender equally. This allows for a more in-depth analysis of the complexity of socioeconomic and racial stratification and the way it manifests itself in the context of violent crime rates and disinvestment.

In part, Henri Lefebvre’s theory is useful in examining gentrification.¹⁵ Lefebvre categorizes space as perceived, conceived, and lived. The main distinction between these three spaces is that each serves a specific function. Even though they overlap, these spaces are *not* identical. Perceived space refers to the physical or material space as it relates to concrete elements, such as the dimensions of certain buildings or the actual measurements of a house. Perceived space has intimate ties with capitalism because it is valued by its material worth. This means that a hierarchy of spaces, and consequently the people who inhabit them, is constructed by dominant powers. Conceived space, on the other hand, is tied to the way in which urban planners and cartographers construct urban spaces using specific codes or signs that are readable to its inhabitants. Conceived space, by its very design, perpetuates hierarchies because built within it are various types of symbols and mechanisms meant to control and dictate how people live. This includes, but is certainly not limited to, the barrio’s physical layout, which oftentimes severely hinders the interaction among members of the community. In part this is tied to, for example, the lack of safe community centers, which are, in turn, rooted in the disinvestment of the barrio by federal, state, and local government. Finally, lived space deals with the way in which people function within spaces. It is their (inter)actions that reveal how these spaces are utilized.¹⁶ Lived space is determined by barrio residents and others living on the margins that come to reconfigure power structures and hierarchies by (re)defining conceived and perceived space.¹⁷ It is real individuals that dictate how space and consequently the barrio functions.

As noted by Nancy Denton and Douglas Massey, the segregation in New York City barrios reflects social-spatial relations that can be most appropriately described as “spatial apartheid.”¹⁸ More specifically, this speaks to rigid racial and class divides in urban neighborhoods. Even though *de jure* segre-

gation ended in 1954,¹⁹ de facto segregation continues. However, rather than being enforced through legal means, these separations are economically implemented through hierarchies. Moreover, they are further imposed both formally—through hyper-policing in working-class, minority communities—and informally—for example, in terms of what spaces residents are allowed to reside in and traverse safely. As noted by Liam Kennedy, “space is not simply the parameter or stage of social relations and actions, rather that it is operative in the ‘assembly’ of these [relations.]”²⁰ This means that space is not separate or distinct from power structures; instead it is critical to ensure that mechanisms of power remain in place. Public and private sectors are not being held responsible for creating these conditions; the lack of investment on the part of the city, state, and federal governments is instead rendered a “normal” or “natural” component of the barrio and its residents by governing entities. However, in reality “there is *nothing* natural or inevitable about disinvestment.”²¹ Instead of dismissing this as a general lack of resources, disinvestment functions as deliberate, in that it takes place “as a result of largely rational decisions by owners, landlords, local and national governments, and an array of financial institutions.”²² This means that hierarchies and poverty-level conditions are purposefully created to maximize long-term gains at the cost of working-class residents.

Furthermore, over the last twenty years of deindustrialization, new patterns of decentralization and recentralization have grown with the large influx of documented and undocumented immigrants. Together with the increased privatization of public spaces, the result has been the growth of the urban “underclass.”²³ These decisions of disinvestment are “justified” in that low-income neighborhoods, along with its residents, are not defined as financially, culturally, and socially profitable. On a daily basis, residents of these neighborhoods have limited access to community resources, such as free community events, safe parks, and libraries, which often result in dysfunctional consequences translating into high homicide rates and other violent crimes tied to the hierarchy of spaces.

Memorial Murals and Disinvestment

As noted by Keva Barton and Melvin Delgado, “neighborhood billboards [or murals] are used to elicit critical examination of the root causes and solutions to the daily onslaught against inner-city youth . . . documenting community life and . . . kindl[ing] discussion on the untimely deaths of neighborhood residents.”²⁴ By “the daily onslaught,” Barton and Delgado speak to the daily challenges linked to disinvestment. This includes carefully navigating the walk home from school or work around abandoned or dilapidated buildings, such as in *Bodega Dreams* and being driven out by rent gouging such as *In the Heights*. Memorial murals function as a reminder of lived experiences of violence that links the barrio and its residents through a shared history of disinvestment.

The memorial murals of New York City barrios provide a unique canvas with a distinct history. Initially appearing in the late 1980s, memorial murals

commemorate predominantly African American and Latinx lives brutally cut short at a young age.²⁵ The 1980s are of particular importance because they mark the “War on Drugs” campaign initially launched by Richard Nixon in the late 1960s and escalated by Ronald Reagan in the 1980s. For working-class barrios, this resulted in hyper-policing to enforce drug laws. Federal consequences linked to drug possession, for instance, resulted in the criminalization of poor communities of color.²⁶ Drug penalties punished low-income offenders more severely. This, in turn, contributed to the myth of crime and poverty as “endemic” to ethnic working-class communities when, in reality, they sprouted because of stratification and disinvestment. As a protest of this shift, prominent New York City graffiti artist Spon created a memorial mural that highlights New York City Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly’s 1993 decision that authorized police to switch from traditional revolvers to 9-mm semiautomatic pistols.²⁷ When asked why he composed such a memorial, Spon responded that it “was a Rest in Peace for the victims who have passed and will pass at the hands of police.”²⁸ Although not all memorial mural deaths are due to violence, unfortunately they represent a large number of premature deaths in New York City barrios. These canvases are, in part, the product of resources (or lack thereof), such as job, educational, and safe communities, made (un)available by local and state government agencies that contribute to higher crime rates. In this respect, memorial murals center the faces of the barrio plagued by the violence of poverty and targeting predominately communities of color.

Each memorial mural draws upon specific traditional and cultural symbol(s). For example, the shared tragedy of the loss of a family member or friend transcends any one individual ethnic group. Indeed, memorial murals assert the ethnic roots of the lives lost as well as that of the barrio as a whole by “transform[ing] . . . fragmented and discontinuous urban landscapes into cultural forms with continuity, [that are] rich in values, . . . [and] bring forth a sense of attachment.”²⁹ Aponte-Parés centers the importance of forging bonds amid the severe ruptures that result from displacement. While by no means a form of panacea, memorial murals reinforce community through a shared collective experience. However, this does not signify that pan-Latinx coalitions exist; instead distinct ethnic enclaves are formed alongside each other as a means of survival.³⁰ It is these very ethnic enclaves that strengthen and bring together the homogeneity of loss amid heterogeneous Latinx communities. While all barrio residents do not experience loss in the same way, there is a shared collective experience rooted in violence. The individual loss of a life is no longer an isolated incident; it becomes instead part of a shared narrative that commands the audience to bear witness to the stark realities of barrio residents. Unlike graffiti, memorial artists often obtain permission before painting murals.³¹ This ensures the longevity of the mural and the full participation of the community. Given the large role that memorial murals hold in New York City barrios, this critical visual art form functions as a vehicle to critique state powers as highlighted in *Bodega Dreams*.

***Bodega Dreams* and the Construction of Freddy's Memorial Mural**

Quiñonez draws attention to the construction of memorial murals to speak to the everyday forms of terror and violence associated with the barrio. In the novel, the protagonist, Julio, gains popularity in the barrio as a local memorial muralist. This, in turn, opens the doors for a potentially lucrative business opportunity. Primarily recommended by word of mouth, fellow barrio residents approach Julio to design murals in honor of long-term residents and loved ones who have passed on. As a memorial artist, Julio, contributes to building community. Despite limited economic resources, long-term residents use their funds to commission Julio. Moreover, all agreements were strictly verbal, speaking to the mutual trust that Julio has with his fellow neighbors. For example, Quiñonez notes, “[Julio] would never ask for money up front, because then you wouldn’t get tipped.”³² In part, painting a mural requires a financial investment as payment does not occur until services are fully rendered. This is worth noting considering Julio’s limited funds; yet he always made sure he had enough supplies before he set out to paint a mural.³³ Although Julio did this in part to maximize the amount of gratuity received, it also addresses the level of investment necessary in building community.

The act of painting a memorial mural includes the selection of specific cultural and ethnic symbols associated with the collective history of violence linked to the barrio. In *Bodega Dreams*, Julio is commissioned to paint a memorial mural for Freddy, a young and long-term resident whose life was cut short by violence. In this case, Freddy’s cousin and fellow Spanish Harlem resident personally approaches Julio to paint a mural. She shares the details of Freddy’s death and the elements for the construction of the memorial mural with Julio: “[Freddy] was shot by mistake . . . [and I want the mural] on the wall of P.S. 101’s schoolyard. . . . Freddy would hang there all night. I want it to read, ‘Freddy the best of 109th Street, R.I.P.’ And then I want the flag of Borinquen and a big conga with Freddy’s face on it.”³⁴ Although the particulars surrounding his death are left unclear, what is evident is that Freddy’s life was violently cut short. The incorporation of traditional and historic symbols in the murals, as exemplified by the figures of the conga drum and Puerto Rican flag, coupled with the mural’s placement “on the wall of the P.S. schoolyard” demonstrate ethnic pride and function to educate barrio youth with a history reflective of its population.³⁵ For example, in *Bodega Dreams*, Julio notes that throughout his schooling, little to nothing was done to teach the predominately Latinx barrio students about their history. Julio states, “we were almost convinced that our race had no culture.”³⁶ As absurd as Julio’s comment may sound, on the one hand, it reflects the antagonism between teachers, administrators, and students. On the other, Julio’s comment heavily critiques the failure of the traditional public-school curriculum to reflect diverse ethnic experience and histories.³⁷ As a result, racial and class-based hierarchies are upheld through the lack of recog-

dition of barrio resident's identity and history. This lack of recognition breeds animosity and opposition, often labeled as "behavioral problems" among youth like Julio. In part, he directly reacts to this marginalization by questioning what is seen and valued as "truth." His lived experiences fuel the need to document a local Latinx history through murals as a reflection of the neighborhood he grew up in; this brings him to the critical realization that privileged voices document history, voices that do not often reflect the background of residents such as Julio. It is in this retrospective experience that Julio realizes the power of recording perspectives from his lived experiences.

Julio adorns various walls of the barrio with memorial murals as requested by barrio residents. Clandestine and illegal by nature, his job as a memorial artist centers the importance of his own lived experiences and insight. Julio's job as a memorial artist builds on the experiential knowledge of Quiñonez, who, before becoming a full-time writer, would paint murals, speaking to the intimate connection he also had with his own New York City borough and home. Quiñonez describes himself as often "decorat[ing] plenty of walls ... in the Schomburg Plaza housing complex" near Spanish Harlem.³⁸ His job as a memorial artist speaks to the demand for commemorating and documenting the local history of barrio residents. Memorial murals, as directly related to the author's first-hand experience having grown up in the barrio, function as a powerful foundation for *Bodega Dreams* by drawing on the importance of literally painting a picture that reinforces and solidifies the connection between residents and the lived space of the barrio. On an everyday level, this is of critical importance, especially considering the violence and trauma often linked to working-class neighborhoods. Rather than label these challenges as particular to communities like Julio's, they are intimately linked to the absence of local, state, and federal investment in poor communities of color. Quiñonez pushes the boundaries of barrio stereotypes by pointing to larger institutional factors responsible for breeding these misconceptions.

In part, Quiñonez does this by speaking to the power of informal networks and communities as reflected in real-life New York City-based mural artist Antonio "Chico" Garcia. Chico, as one of the few mural artists to hold such notoriety in the Lower East Side, documents the history of "Loisaida"—as long-time residents commonly refer to it. He highlights the increasing problem of gentrification through a mural by the same name [Figure 1]. Sprawled across a corner, the name "Loisaida" colorfully adorns and takes up most of the mural. While Loisaida is not a memorial mural like that constructed by Julio, it provides a similarly powerful message as highlighted by the close-up of the center portion of the mural [Figure 2]. In the close-up, the audience bears witness to the image of a long-term working-class resident tearing through the middle of the mural with a sign that reads "Home Sweet Home L.E.S." L.E.S. stands for Lower East Side; simultaneously it also reads "homeless(s)." The spin on the spelling speaks to continuing skyrocketing rents resulting in long-term working-class residents unable to afford housing. Chico provides a critical



Figure 1: “Loisaida” by Antonio “Chico” Garcia.

institutional critique of the changing landscape of the Lower East Side and its long-term identity as a Latinx barrio. Moreover, the fact that the artist refers to the Lower East Side lovingly as “Loisaida” also works to hark on the history of the borough. Liz Ševčenko notes that many Spanish-speaking Puerto Ricans had trouble pronouncing Lower East Side, so the name “Loisaida” was adapted to give it a “Spanish rhythm” and identity in 1974.³⁹ The term serves to reaffirm cultural and social capital that directly ties residents to Loisaida. Although not a traditional memorial mural of a mourned long-term working-class resident, it provides a critique of how the core identity of the Latinx neighborhood is slowly dying. Chico’s mural speaks to the ongoing battle to keep the borough accessible for the Latinx working-class community. As the local history of barrios like that of Chico and Julio continues to change, much of the history remains undocumented. Murals highlight the strength of neighborhoods by filling in the gaps and connections from each community member to the community as a whole.

The powerful imagery and iconic references are critical fixtures that Julio similarly evokes in his memorial mural of Freddy. The long and rich history of Puerto Rico by the specific request to include the “Borinquen” flag is a central tenet. The term “Borinquen” refers to the “Land of the Brave Lord,” the name that the Arawak Indians or Boricuas gave to the island of Puerto Rico before colonization, and the island was later dubbed Puerto Rico by Spanish coloniz-



Figure 2: Close-up of “Loisaida” by Antonio “Chico” Garcia.

ers.⁴⁰ In fact, numerous student organizations in the 1960s and 1970s utilized the history of colonization as a means of social and political protest to contest the lack of access to higher education for students of Puerto Rican origin. This includes the disproportionate number of soldiers of Puerto Rican origin killed during the Vietnam War.⁴¹ Freddy’s memorial mural then critically links the longer overarching Borinquen history of colonization and exploitation.⁴² In this respect, the memorial mural transcends time and points to the fact that even the migration of Puerto Ricans into New York City boroughs continues to be plagued by the lack of resources and opportunities. On a contemporary level this manifests itself as disinvestment. The lack of upkeep in the city streets, buildings, and community resources has a direct impact on the community, resulting in higher levels of crime and violence made all the more powerful amid the backdrop of colonization. For residents like Freddy’s cousin, constructing the details of the memorial mural contribute to the creation of a space for communal acknowledgement; in fact, the murals highlight how these otherwise marginalized voices continue to live on in the barrio through the collective memories of residents. Freddy’s death could have been avoided were it not for the violence that afflicts working-class communities. Julio frames Freddy as more than a homicide statistic and depicts him instead as a familiar face of the barrio that ended far too early. Freddy’s memorial mural humanizes him as a critical member of the community, family member, and friend. Consequently, memorial murals “take an active role in reshaping landscapes of despair into landscapes of hope” by creating unity through the celebration of a shared social and cultural history.⁴³

Rather than label high homicide and crime rates as endemic to Latinx barrios, the text provides a larger picture linked to disinvestment and segregation. Disinvestment is the result of limited economic and educational opportunities that breed crime. As a result, the crime generated within disenfranchised barrios in reality represents a much larger problem linked to stratification that keeps low-income minority communities in poverty. In this respect, Freddy's memorial mural (and barrio murals in general) serve as daily reminders of the trials and tribulations of being Latinx in the United States.⁴⁴ Memorial murals challenge the myth of the barrio as filled with crime by pointing to the larger circumstances as predominately associated with disinvestment. In part, this misconception is fed by the capitalist system that promotes the myth of individual merit and effort as leading to success, which generally places the blame solely on individuals rather than larger institutional powers responsible for creating limited economic and social conditions.⁴⁵

Abuela Claudia and “Paciencia y Fe” (Patience and Faith)

Economic disparities are a central tenet in Hudes and Miranda's play *In the Heights*, through Abuela Claudia's, the barrio grandmother and long-term resident of Washington Heights, memorial mural, which reads “Abuela Claudia, ‘Paciencia y Fe’” (Patience and Faith). The phrase functions as her mantra and, consequently, the title of the solo song performed by her character in the musical [see Figure 3]. In her solo, Claudia shares how she arrived in New York City in 1943 as a child due to financial hardship,⁴⁶ unlike post-1959 Cuban immigrants who, as Grosfuguel and Georas point out, left the island because of Fidel Castro's rise to power.⁴⁷ Abuela Claudia's experience instead strongly parallels the struggles of many Puerto Rican and Dominican immigrants, for whom service sector jobs historically functioned as one of the principal areas of employment available. As noted by Gabriela Haslip-Veira, “overall Puerto Ricans and other Latinxs [have] worked in the garment industry, in paper box factories, in enterprises that manufactured dolls or plastic products, in restaurants, in grocery stores, in hotels, in office buildings, residential structures, as cooks, dishwashers.”⁴⁸ Haslip-Veira points to how little has changed as the high cost of living along with the limited job opportunities has left Latinx (im)migrants vulnerable to poor housing conditions as well as mistreatment by factory owners and service sector companies. Abuela Claudia's position as a domestic worker highlights her position as representative of the trajectory of working-class labor of Latinx communities.

Abuela Claudia describes her job experiences in her solo, which centers on “Paciencia y Fe” emphasizing a passive (false) message that hard work will literally pay off as highlighted in her memorial mural. While the mantra originated from her mother in Cuba, her continued use of the phrase points to her own lack of interrogation of the phrase. Although she is financially better off, she *still* lives in poverty. Even though she “cleaned . . . homes, polishing with



Figure 3: Anna Louizos, *Abuela Claudia: 'Paciencia y Fe'*," *In the Heights*, Broadway Production (2007; New York: Anna Louizos Designs). Reproduced with the permission of Anna Louizos Designs, LLC.

pride/scrubbing the whole of the Upper East Side/The days [turned] into weeks, the weeks into years, . . . [and, despite it all] here [in Washington Heights] she . . . stayed."⁴⁹ The lyrics convey a deceptively upbeat tone and pride in doing a good job. The hard reality, however, is that (im)migrants like Abuela Claudia have limited job options. As noted in the song, what was supposed to be a temporary job turned into a position that she held for most of her life, something she did not covet. Even though the cost of living continued to rise, her salary

remained the same—at the poverty level. Despite it all, as the lyrics reveal, Abuela Claudia continued “polishing [the homes of upper class people] with pride.”⁵⁰ The song and the framing of the memorial mural with “Paciencia y Fe” misleads the audience into thinking that Abuela Claudia somehow found complacency in her job as a housekeeper and that she was even happy with her position. Abuela Claudia’s memorialization is flattened by the single phrase that literally frames her as one-dimensional. Digging deeper into the image and message, specifically with respect to the historical and political context of her lived experience, reveals another story.

On the one hand, the “Paciencia y Fe” memorial mural speaks to all long-term barrio residents as Abuela Claudia served as the grandmother of *all* of the barrio’s residents. For example, she unofficially adopted Usnavi as her grandson. In this respect, she literally functions as a vital artery that delivers life to the barrio community. Where economic and political capital was absent, residents like Abuela Claudia compensated with social capital through community building. Abuela Claudia never gave up on the barrio; despite continued economic challenges, the community prevailed. The memorial functions as a reminder of the community of long-term working-class residents and clients of Usnavi’s bodega in the face of the continued growth of more affluent residents.

On the other hand, Abuela Claudia’s solo functions to remind audiences of the limitations of “Paciencia y Fe” when employed in low-wage jobs with few to no prospects, echoing a longer history of socioeconomic stratification in the form of a lack of educational, financial, and job opportunities in the barrio. Instead of labeling this phenomenon as arbitrary, disinvestment takes place “as a result of largely rational decisions by . . . local and national governments, and an array of financial institutions.”⁵¹ Both public and private sectors make purposeful and conscious decisions to disinvest in certain neighborhoods and its residents. These decisions are “justified” because corporations and government entities mark the neighborhoods, along with their residents, as not financially, culturally, and socially profitable. Abuela Claudia’s solo (and later her memorial mural) draws attention to this matter by noting the multigenerational nature of the phenomenon when her own mother asked her to garner “Paciencia y Fe” during financially challenging times. In the context of her memorial mural, the premise lies in the fact that her perseverance and hope will be rewarded. This is an unrealistic and unattainable model.

As the informal “grandmother” of the barrio, Abuela Claudia’s presence serves to build community with fellow barrio residents. Gentrification, however, slowly strips Abuela Claudia of those ties as long-term friends and neighbors are driven out because of skyrocketing rents. Her community and neighbors for the most part were renters whose monthly payments were less than the worth of the property—leaving building owners with net losses because the value of the apartment homes was not being maximized.⁵² As rents increased, long-term working-class residents like Abuela Claudia and her neighbors were rendered expendable. This is particularly devastating to her because, despite all

of Abuela Claudia's hardships, Washington Heights served as a stable home for many years.

Although the play as a whole speaks to the consequences of gentrification, it does so through a conservative lens that does not hold governmental powers accountable for the disinvestment in the barrio. "Paciencia y Fe" and the hardships and challenges of barrio residents send a heavily filtered and narrow message by the playwrights largely due to the target audience, consisting of the Broadway public of predominately middle- and upper-class visitors. Anything beyond the conservative model would put at risk the attendance and overall (financial) success of the play. This is best exemplified by the closing of the play, the conclusion of her solo reveals Abuela Claudia holds the winning lottery ticket entitling her to \$96,000 and essentially, her ticket out of the barrio and reward for her "Paciencia y Fe."

In the Heights confronts viewers with the unrealistic message that winning the lottery is a viable way out of poverty. However, few, if any, options are available for people like Abuela Claudia who seek residence outside of poverty. *In the Heights* leads the reader/viewer to believe that winning the lottery was provided for her because of all the hardship she endured up to that point. The play provides a particularly problematic message, especially considering the limited portrayal of Latinx communities on the Broadway stage. Although "Paciencia y Fe" increased Abuela Claudia's and Usnavi's morale when dealing with daunting situations, morale alone does not pay the bills. No magical ticket exists. Instead the play gives a false hope that "Paciencia y Fe" will lead to an economic betterment. Abuela Claudia passes away shortly after making her announcement as the winning lottery ticket holder. Her death comes in the midst of a terrible heat wave and massive blackouts, as well as rioting and protests resulting from increased rents and few opportunities for barrio for residents and business owners to stay in Washington Heights.

As the play progresses, the audience bear witness to the fact that many of the mom-and-pop-shops such as the local car service and beauty salon, staples in Washington Heights for years, close down or relocate due to rising rents. Abuela Claudia leaves the majority of her winnings to Usnavi, the owner of the local bodega. Prior to his newfound monetary wealth, Usnavi planned to sell his bodega and leave the barrio. With all his fellow neighbors leaving, he no longer found any purpose in staying. He originally plans on using his share of the lottery winnings for an easier life in the Dominican Republic, but later changes his mind as he realizes that he has a duty, place, and intimate connection to Washington Heights. In the Finale number Usnavi shares how, "In five years when this whole city's rich folks and hipsters, who's gonna miss this raggedy business?"⁵³ Usnavi has lived in Washington Heights all of his life and has been well aware of the shifting population and urban landscape that gentrification has brought with it. As he breaks the news of his departure to his fifteen-year-old cousin, Sonny, Usnavi is surprised that the young man has contracted the local graffiti artist, Graffiti Pete, to paint a memorial mural of Abuela Claudia on

one of the bodega gates. At that very moment, everything changes for Usnavi as he realizes that he has an obligation to the barrio and its residents.

The Abuela Claudia memorial mural anchors Usnavi to Washington Heights by reminding him of the importance of the barrio community through conceived space—as reflected by the physical design of neighborhoods and intended by urban planners and architects—versus lived space. Gentrification shifts the conceived space of the barrio by redefining and often reconstructing the physical landscape of the barrio. Even though the conceived space of the barrio accommodates and caters to an affluent class, the bodega still stands as a distinct cultural center in Washington Heights that offsets the changing landscape. That is why the placement of the memorial mural is of particular importance. The bodega serves as a critical center for the barrio frequented by residents, where community is built and daily experiences with locals at the store are shared. Given the scarcity—if not complete absence—of community centers, the bodega helps to build social capital through community collectives. Even though the gate, where the memorial mural is placed, functions as a door meant to house food and supplies, its location reminds Usnavi and his neighbors of the importance of Abuela Claudia's role in the lives of barrio residents. Abuela Claudia links the contemporary urban landscape to the cultural roots and longer history of the barrio. As a form of lived communal space, the mural dispels the conceived space of the barrio as controlled and dictated by actual residents.

Abuela Claudia was considered the matriarch of the barrio because she was always ready and willing to help fellow residents as they shared their daily struggles and challenges through informal oral histories. The memorial mural operates as a reminder of this, especially considering that Washington Heights' residents were keenly aware of her role—as further reflected by the images of rural and urban imagery in the background of her memorial mural. One side reflects palm trees and colonial buildings, presumably from her native Cuba, and, on the other, traditional New York City apartment buildings. Overall, Graffiti Pete articulates this message, which is exemplified by the closing lyrics of the *Finale*, when Usnavi decides to stay in Washington Heights after bearing witness to the mural. As the owner of the local bodega, Usnavi realizes that he too asserts the lived space of the neighborhood in that he “Illuminate[s] the stories of the people in the street/Some have happy endings, some are bittersweet/But I know them all and that's what makes my life complete. . . . And if not me, who keeps our legacies?/Who's gonna keep the coffee sweet with secret recipes?”⁵⁴ Similar to Abuela Claudia's role, as highlighted in her memorial mural, Usnavi's character serves as the barrio chronicler—a role he built upon from his experiential knowledge that comes from a lifetime of living in Washington Heights—but perhaps more importantly, through the many conversations he has with his stable set of clients, neighbors, and friends as the local bodega owner. At the same time, however, the message conveyed is ominous because

things continue to change and, despite Usnavi's drive, rents still skyrocket and long-term residents are still being driven out.

Abuela Claudia's memorial mural exemplifies the importance of preserving the history of barrio residents. Constructed by barrio resident, Graffiti Pete, for barrio residents, Abuela Claudia's memorial mural reminds the viewing audience of the barrio's roots. Hardships—due to gentrification or otherwise—will continue, but through figures like Abuela Claudia (and by extension Usnavi) the stories of residents live on and enable the reappropriation of the space of the barrio. Unfortunately, there are limitations to the message and memory of Julio's grandmother, considering the short lifespan of memorial murals. The continually shifting landscape of the barrio directly threatens the memory of community leaders like Abuela Claudia. Without barrio residents like Usnavi to relay important life lessons to dovetail visual histories, the barrio and its history may be lost.

It is important, nonetheless, to recall that the concept of community in Abuela Claudia's memorial mural has been idealized by mislabeling "Paciencia y Fe" with eventual monetary rewards based on unrealistic lottery winnings. "Paciencia y Fe" renders economic and social challenges, such as having access to jobs with livable wages, moot and instead replaces them with an unrealistic financial outlet of winning a lottery—a literal gamble. Furthermore, although memorial murals offer solace and the reassertion of lived space, they are temporary in nature. Memorial murals may deliver a critical message that honor the memory of the deceased by making the personal a public matter through collective consciousness, but they do not change social conditions. Similarly, Quiñonez's novel *Bodega Dreams* further problematizes the issue of the shifting urban landscape and the options available for social change. The difference is that Quiñonez's novel takes place in Spanish Harlem and is not targeted to the same Broadway audience as the theatrical work of Hudes and Miranda. Quiñonez elaborates on the multicultural history of this New York City borough, which serves to provide greater detail in terms of the hardships and challenges associated with the gentrification of the barrio.

Coda

Gentrification is devastating to long-term, predominately working-class Latinx and other minority residents particularly because of New York City's high cost of living coupled with limited affordable housing. The challenges associated with gentrification, however, span far beyond Spanish Harlem and Washington Heights and reflect challenges faced by working-class residents predominately in metropolitan cities nationwide. For example, in California recent studies reveal that residents in Los Angeles—the second most populous city in the United States after New York City—utilize almost half of their income toward rent.⁵⁵ The situation has grown so challenging that the state and federal officials recently built the Selma Community Workforce Housing Proj-

ect meant for Los Angeles Unified employees in an effort to attract and retain staff.⁵⁶ As metropolitan areas across the United States continue to grow, so does the need for affordable housing that speaks directly to long-term working-class residents who have multigenerational histories in the barrio as reflected in memorial murals.

In failing to provide accessible housing, city and state agencies leave entire communities vulnerable to displacement and dislocation as they make room for more affluent middle-class residents. However, barrio communities continue to find ways of building solidarity to resist displacement as collectivities. Through memorial murals and informal collectives, barrio residents turn to each other to find alternative means to build community and reaffirm their social and cultural agency. The lived space of the barrio demands agency by defining how the space of the barrio is utilized, despite limited resources. Oftentimes action and protest take place through alternative creative means to challenge oppressive regimes. Time and again left with almost no agency, marginalized communities resort to collective and kinship ties that function as the only means of opposition when political and economic agency are not otherwise attainable. In part, the underlying message of memorial murals and gentrification heavily resonates today within the context of racial and class hierarchies. In this respect, the examination of working-class Latinx neighborhoods functions as a case study of a much larger problem linked to communities of color facing similar challenges. Perhaps more importantly, this examination recognizes that pockets of resistance can be forged amid seemingly insurmountable opposition. While the perceived and conceived spaces of the barrio have already been laid out beforehand, lived space allots for agency by defining how the space of the barrio is actually utilized.

Notes

1. Latinx is a gender-neutral term referring to communities of Latin American origin living in the United States.

2. M. Ryzik, "Heights before Broadway," *The New York Times*, March 14, 2008, E1.

3. L. Ross, "The Boards: Local Boy," *The New Yorker*, March 19, 2007, 64.

4. Q. A. Hudes, *Welcome to My Neighborhood! A Barrio ABC* (New York: Arthur A. Levine Books, 2010), 2.

5. A. Soloski, "A Family's Story Spans a Trilogy, and Beyond" *The New York Times*, December 2, 2012, AR.9.

6. R. Heinze, "In the Heights" (Review), *Theatre Journal* 60, no. 1 (2008): 145. Luis Valdez's *Zoot Suit* was the first play written by a Latinx about the Latinx experience to debut on Broadway. Unfortunately, it had an extremely limited run and opened to low ticket sales. By contrast, it was a box office success in Los Angeles' Mark Taper Forum, having multiple sold-out shows. *The Capeman*, the second play about the Latinx experience to debut on Broadway, also had a very short run; however, it was not written by Latinxs. Like *Zoot Suit*, it opened to "lukewarm reviews" (Heinze 145). Although *West Side Story* also had a prosperous Broadway run and, in part, deals with the Puerto Rican community, it was based on a book written by Arthur Laurents, a non-Latinx, and is loosely based on William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. *West Side Story* first and foremost foregrounds the love story between the protagonists, Maria and Tony, while rendering the perspective of the Latinx community as secondary. John Leguizamo's one man shows *Sexaholic . . . A Love Story* (2002), *Freak: A Semi Demi-Quasi Pseudo Autobiography* (1998), and *Ghetto Klown* (2011), as well as *Latinologues* (2010) written by Rick Najera, have also had Broadway runs. However, Leguizamo's plays have been heavily criticized for perpetuating stereotypes (Heinze 145).

7. See C. Isherwood, "From the Corner Bodega, the Music of Everyday Life," *The New York Times*, February 13, 2007, E2; C. Robertson, "You're 27. Here Are Millions to Stage Your Musical," *The New York Times*, February 18, 2007, 2.9; and D. Itzkoff, "Recoups Its Initial Investment," *The New York Times*, January 9, 2009, C5. Miranda gained great fame for the Broadway hit *Hamilton*, the bio-musical about Alexander Hamilton, which earned eleven Tony Awards and sixteen nominations, a record-breaking number. Perhaps more noteworthy is the fact that he also won a Pulitzer Prize and a Grammy Award for *Hamilton* in 2016 (Erik Piepenburg, "Why 'Hamilton' Has Heat," *The New York Times*, June 12, 2016).

8. Ernesto Quiñonez, *Bodega Dreams* (New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 2000).

9. A. Dávila, *Barrio Dreams: Puerto Ricans, Latinos and the Neoliberal City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 120.

10. Raúl Villa, *Barrio-Logos: Space and Place in Urban Chicano Literature and Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 3. Chicano similarly functions as a gender-neutral term referring specifically to U.S. residents with Mexican origins.

11. *Ibid.*, 3-4.

12. Yolanda Broyles-González, *El Teatro Camepsino: Theater in the Chicano Movement* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 248.

13. June Dwyer, "When Willie Met Gatsby: The Critical Implications of Ernesto Quiñonez's *Bodega Dreams*," *Literature Interpretation Theory* 14 (2003): 165-78.

14. Elias Domínguez-Barajas, "The Postmodern Ethnic Condition in Ernesto Quiñonez's *Bodega Dreams*," *Latino Studies* 12, no. 1 (2014): 7-26.

15. H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1991).

16. Rob Shields, "Henri Lefebvre: Biographical Details and Theoretical Context," in *Key Thinkers on Space and Place*, ed. Phil Hubbard, Rob Kitchin, and Gill Valentine (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2004), 210.

17. *Ibid.*

18. N. Denton and D. S. Massey, "Segregation and the Making of the Underclass," in *The Urban Sociology Reader*, ed. Christopher Mele and Jan Lin (New York: Routledge, 2005), 135.

19. De jure segregation legally allowed state-sponsored racial separation in public schools, until 1954 when the U.S. Supreme Court declared it unconstitutional in *Oliver Brown et al. vs. Board of Education of Topeka*—see J. T. Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and Its Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), xiii. The decision was met with a great deal of resistance that included violence and backlash by many southern whites. Arguably the decision would later give rise to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, which would call upon the removal of other similarly unjust laws, such as Jim Crow laws (Patterson 46).

20. Liam Kennedy, "The Miasma of Urbanization," in *Race and Urban Space in Contemporary American Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), 9.

21. B. Duncan, N. Reid, and N. Smith, "From Disinvestment to Reinvestment: Mapping the Urban 'Frontier' in the Lower East Side," in *From Urban Village to East Village: The Battle for New York's Lower East Side*, ed. Janet L. Abu-Lughod (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 152.

22. *Ibid.*, 151.

23. Kennedy, "The Miasma of Urbanization," 3. The term "urban underclass" refers to working-class minorities that have been marginalized spatially and financially.

24. K. Barton and M. Delgado, "Murals in Latino Communities: Social Indicators of Community Strength," *Social Work* 43, no. 4 (1998): 349.

25. M. Cooper and J. Sciorra, *R.I.P.: New York City Spray Can Murals* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 7.

26. A prominent example can be seen in the possession of one gram of crack, a less expensive drug typically associated with poorer communities, which results in the same sentence as the possession of 100 grams of powder cocaine, a significantly higher priced drug linked with the middle and upper classes—see Shaun L. Gabbidon and Helen Taylor Greene, *Race, Crime and Justice: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 344. In an effort to address these disparities, on August 3, 2010, then President Obama signed the Fair Sentencing Act of 2010, which changed the mandatory minimum quantity triggers of both crack and cocaine possession. Under the new law, the five-year mandatory minimum sentence for crack cocaine was shifted from five to 28 grams and 500 grams for powder cocaine, shifting the ratio from 100:1 to 18:1—see Gary G. Grindler, "Memorandum for all Federal Prosecutors: The Fair Sentencing Act of 2010," U.S. Department of Justice, Office of the Deputy Attorney General, August 5, 2010, 1. While the law reduces disparities, the numbers reveal great discrepancies that continue to perpetuate class and racial discrimination.

27. R. W. Kelly, "The Police Department's Revolution: Much Was at Stake in the Choice of Guns," *The New York Times*, February 5, 1999, A17.

28. Cooper and Sciorra, *R.I.P.*, 73.

29. L. Aponte-Parés, "Appropriating Place in Puerto Rican Barrios," in *Preserving Cultural Landscapes in America*, ed. Arnold R. Alanen and Robert Z. Melnick (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 94-111.

30. Ines M. Miyares and Kenneth J. Gowen, "Re-creating Borders? The Geography of Latin Americans in New York City," in *Yearbook. Conference of Latin Americanist Geographers* 24 (1998): 43.
31. Cooper and Sciorra, *R.I.P.*, xx.
32. Quiñonez, *Bodega Dreams*, 3.
33. *Ibid.*
34. *Ibid.*, 5.
35. *Ibid.*
36. *Ibid.*, 6.
37. Maulana Karenga, "Race Ethnic Relations: Concepts, Definitions, and Perspectives," in *The Ethnic Experience reader*, California State University-Long Beach, Spring 2002: 3.
38. R. Finn, "Spanish Harlem's Emerging Literary Voice," *The New York Times*, March 15, 2000, B2.
39. Liz Ševčenko, "Making Loaisaida: Placing Puertorriqueñidad in Lower Manhattan," in *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York City*, ed. Agustín Laó-Montes and Arlene Dávila (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 300.
40. R. Santiago, *Boricuas: Influential Puerto Rican Writings—An Anthology* (New York: One World, 1995), xviii.
41. A. Torres and J. E. Velázquez, *The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices from the Diaspora* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 125.
42. Quiñonez further underlines this point by dividing the novel into "rounds" instead of chapters. The "rounds" refer to the way in which boxing matches are divided and imply that barrio residents are not idle and constantly fighting back.
43. Aponte-Parés, "Appropriating Place," 98.
44. J. Solis, "Immigration Status and Identity: Undocumented Mexicans in New York," in *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York*, ed. Agustín Laó-Montes and Arlene Dávila (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 349.
45. A. Feldman, *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 3.
46. Q. A. Hudes and L. Miranda, *In the Heights: Vocal Selections* (Milwaukee: Williamson Music, 2008).
47. R. Grosfoguel and C. S. Georas. "Latino Caribbean Diasporas in New York" in *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York*, ed. Agustín Laó-Montes and Arlene Dávila (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 113.
48. G. Haslip-Veira, "The Evolution of the Latino Community," in *Hispanic New York: A Sourcebook*, ed. Claudio Iván Remeseira (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 44.
49. Hudes and Miranda, *In the Heights: Vocal Selections*.
50. *Ibid.*
51. Duncan, et al., "From Disinvestment," 151. Although this quote refers specifically to the Lower East Side of New York, the same principle applies to the Upper East Side, as well as other neighborhoods throughout the United States that have experienced or are experiencing gentrification.
52. *Ibid.*, 152
53. Hudes and Miranda, *In the Heights: Vocal Selections*.
54. *Ibid.*
55. R. Ray, P. Ong, and S. Jimenez, "Impacts of the Widening Divide: Los Angeles at the Forefront of the Rent Burden Crisis," Center for the Study of Inequality, UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs, September 2014, 18. <http://www.anderson.ucla.edu/Documents/areas/ctr/ziman/2014-08WPrev.pdf>.
56. D. Romero, "L.A. Rents Are So High the School District is Building Apartments for Teachers," *L.A. Weekly*, May 7, 2015; Lisa Boon, "Affordable Housing Exists in L.A.: Check Out These Tours," *Los Angeles Times*, September 20, 2017; Anna M. Phillips, "LAUSD Teachers Earn Too Much to Live in the Affordable Housing Apartments Built for Them," *The Los Angeles Times*, October 19, 2016.