

University of Nevada, Reno

Segundo Acto: The Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre in the 1980s-90s

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in
History

by

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May, 2020



THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

We recommend that the thesis
prepared under our supervision by

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entitled

**Segundo Acto: The Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre in the
1980s-90s**

be accepted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the history of the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre during the 1980s and 1990s as a forum for the expression of a pan-Latinx identity. The paper draws on two different strands of evidence: plays that were produced and/or written during the period in question and archival material housed in the New York Public Library, including programs, newspaper articles, memos, reports, and contracts that the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre drew up with outside organizations during this period. The plays that are studied in this paper are *The Fanlights* by Rene Marques, *Simpson Street* by Eduardo Gallardo, *The Boiler Room* by Reuben Gonzalez, *Bodega* Federico Fraguada, *Ariano* by Richard Irizzarry, *Spanish Eyes* by Eduardo Ivan Lopez, *I Am A Winner* by Fred Valle, *First Class* by Candido Tirado, and *Bomber Jackets* by Rob Santana.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Where to begin? Graduate school has been such a trying, rewarding, frustrating, and fulfilling experience that it's hard to put it into words. I suppose I should start by thanking my family, especially my mom, who always encouraged me to do well in school and to pursue whatever I wanted to. I would also like to thank Jestina for her constant love and support, for her incredible patience with me while I spent hours at a time reading a seemingly endless stream of books, and for providing assurance when I had my doubts. And of course I have to thank my dog Copper, who gave me a welcome excuse to put down the books/laptop/phone to go outside at least twice a day.

Special thanks go to my teachers as well who showed me that I have so much more to learn than I ever realized, both in graduate school and in my undergrad years. To Dr. Erik Myrup, I thank you for all of your assistance in advising me through my final semesters of undergrad and for showing me that academia can be approached with passion and verve. To Dr. David Hamilton, I would like to thank you for providing me with the perfect opportunity to combine my passions of history and theatre. I also owe a debt of gratitude to all of my instructors here at the University of Nevada, Reno: Dr. Linda Curcio-Nagy, Dr. Meredith Oda, Dr. Elizabeth Raymond, Dr. Barbara Walker, Dr. Sarah Keyes, Dr. Christopher Von Nagy, and Dr. Emily Hobson. Each and every one of you helped me along in this process and I thank you for challenging me and encouraging me to become a better scholar. And Dr. Daniel Enrique-Perez, even though I never took one of your classes, I would also like to thank you for serving on my committee and for

helping me discover the beauty of Latinx theatre and the rich and ancient traditions that inspired it. I would also like to thank Dr. Jorge Huerta. His writing served as a valuable inspiration for this topic and I credit him with expanding my theatrical universe. I also owe him a debt of gratitude for agreeing to be interviewed in the summer of 2019 (which feels like a lifetime ago at this point). It is not often that one encounters a scholar of such brilliance who is also a kind-hearted person. Thank you, Dr. Huerta.

I would like to thank my classmates who made every week an interesting adventure. I couldn't have asked for a better group of people to learn and grow with over the past two years and I couldn't have done this without you. Thank you all. I would also like to extend my heartfelt thanks to the good people in the History Department of the University of Nevada, Reno who made my research possible by providing me with a much needed grant. On that note, I would also like to thank the professionals at the New York Public Library whose work scanning and digitizing the hundreds of pages of archival material I drew upon for this project made it all possible.

Lastly, I would like to thank my students. Being in your presence meant more to me than you can ever realize. Whenever I needed a distraction from the headaches of graduate coursework, you were there. When I was just beginning my career at UNR, you were there to show me the fastest route to our classroom. When I was feeling burned out or overwhelmed, you were there to reinvigorate my curiosity and to show me that teaching can be both fun and meaningful. When I gave my first (and second lecture), you were there. The late great Oscar Hammerstein wrote that "by your pupils you'll be

taught.” I never realized how true that was until I met all of you. Thank you for everything.

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INTRODUCTION

My research will examine the productions and artists involved with the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre (PRTT) during the 1980s and 1990s in order to prove that this theatre company acted as a forum for the creation/expression of a pan-Latinx identity. My research has been influenced by previous works of scholarship such as Nicolas Kanellos' *A History of Hispanic Theatre in the U.S.: Origins to 1940* and Mexican-American Theatre: *Legacy and Reality*, *Chicano Theatre: Themes and Forms* by Jorge Huerta, Alberto Sandoval-Sanchez' *Jose Can You See?* and *Stages of Life*. Many of the works that have been previously published study Latinx theatre during the 1960s and 1970s (or earlier). These are two of the major gaps in the existing historiography that my research will address.

The main aspect of my project that distinguishes it from the previous literature is my thesis that Latinx theatre in the United States formed a pan-ethnic theatre community across varying nationalities. The PRTT is a particularly relevant example of this pan-ethnic community, as they worked with artists from a variety of other Latinx backgrounds. Rather than simply being a theatre for Puerto Ricans by Puerto Ricans, the PRTT morphed into a company that utilized the talents of non-Puerto Rican Latinx theatre people in the staging and creation of their productions. After the initial groundswell of politically motivated theatre activity in the 1960s and 1970s, the 1980s and 1990s show how the Latinx community in the United States (as exemplified by the

activities of the PRTT) continued to participate in a thriving arts scene that emphasized maintaining a uniquely Latinx perspective. This period also allows for a greater understanding of the changes that had taken place in the status of Latinx peoples as a result of (or in some cases, despite) the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Lastly, this period also enables an examination of how Latinx theatre accomplishes its goals and maintains its viability in a theatre environment that is increasingly reliant on grants and other forms of aid (both public and private) to survive.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

In order to fully understand the scholastic background of this topic, it is necessary to elucidate several different strands of historiography. This project adds a new dimension to the history of migration in the United States, which has heretofore concentrated on the economic, political, and social challenges that immigrants and migrants faced upon arrival. Unlike prior migration texts, this project focuses exclusively on the theatre that is being produced by a specific group of migrants (Puerto Ricans) and their descendants. By examining these productions and the company behind them, future scholars will be privy to a more complete picture of both Latinx theatre in the 1980s and 1990s as well as the migrant experience and how it has changed in the late twentieth century.

One such migration text that will be included in this project is Lorrin Thomas' *Puerto Rican Citizen: History and Political Identity in Twentieth-Century New York City*. This work provides an invaluable foundation in the history of Puerto Ricans in New York

City from the second decade of the 20th century to the 1970s. Thomas' work varies from my project in several ways: in *Puerto Rican Citizen*, Thomas relates the struggles of Puerto Ricans to other minorities in the U.S. The author also neglects to consider the artistic output of this community, focusing mainly on the tension that arises from Puerto Rican claims to citizenship.

Puerto Rican Politics in Urban America is another text that my research builds upon. As the title suggests, this edited volume focuses solely on the political undertakings of the Puerto Rican community in urban centers such as Boston, New York City, and Chicago. Like Thomas' work, this text concludes in the 1970s, but it also offers insights into the politics of the island itself stretching back to the mid-19th century. Portions of the work detail how poverty has influenced the politics of the Puerto Rican community as well.

Ramón E. Soto-Crespo's work *Mainland Passage : The Cultural Anomaly of Puerto Rico* is another text that provides contextualization for my research. Unlike the other two works mentioned above, Soto-Crespo's work does examine the cultural output of Puerto Ricans. However, the author's treatment of this subject is limited to prose writing and painting. Although the subject matter of Soto-Crespo's work differs from mine, the time frame examined overlaps with the time period of my research as the author includes works created during the 1990s. The work is most useful to me for providing a greater sense of the cultural milieu in which the PRTT created theatre.

Another branch of historiography that influences this project is the study of Latinx theatre. The scholarship in this area is the most consequential for this project due to its

more narrow focus on the theatre of the Latinx population. While many of the works in this area are similar to this project, they are lacking in some key aspects that this project will strengthen. One of these aspects is the abundance of scholarship that covers the period of the 1960s and 1970s. This time period has been saturated with scholarly work (and rightfully so) due to its significance within the broader story of the Chicano civil rights struggle. Perhaps due to the significance of this period however, the decades immediately following have been neglected by historians. This project will complicate the story of the Chicano movement by bringing it into the subsequent decades and placing it outside of the nexus of Chicano activity in the West.

One of the texts that informs this project is *A History of Hispanic Theatre in The U.S.: Origins to 1940* by Nicolas Kanellos. Kanellos is one of the most prolific scholars working in this field and his work has been a major influence on many of the works below. In *A History...* Kanellos presents the reader with a vast history (spanning the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries) of Latinx theatre. Another important aspect of this work is Kanellos' expansion of Latinx theatre to a number of different American cities. However, Kanellos' work is focused primarily on the U.S. West while mine is limited to one company in New York City.

Jorge Huerta is another key scholar in this field. In 2008 he wrote an article called "From the margins to the mainstream: Latino/a theater in the U.S." which details the theatrical activities of three different groups: Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and Chicanos. Like many other texts, Huerta references the Chicano movement of Luis Valdez but he also

brings this history into the 1980s. However, his treatment of the 1980s is very brief and limited to the Repertorio Espanol.

Another scholar whose work influences this project is Alberto-Sandoval Sanchez. In 1999 he wrote a fascinating monograph about Latinos in media (including theatre as well as film) called *Jose Can You See?*. Sanchez' approach differs from that of Kanellos and Huerta in some notable ways. For one, Sanchez gives more focus to individual performers than do Huerta or Kanellos. Another way in which Sanchez' work differs is in his emphasis on New York City and Broadway specifically. While Sanchez' focus on New York City alone makes it significant to this project, the author's larger focus on Latino representations in the media also relates to one of the questions that this project attempts to answer regarding the effectiveness of the Latinx theatre in reaching its audiences. Sanchez also uses a considerable amount of textual analysis in this work. For example, he parses through the hit Broadway musical *West Side Story* and examines the racist assumptions that the musical's author placed in the piece. In addition to the textual analysis of plays, Sanchez expands his research further into the world of television by examining *I Love Lucy* and how Latinos were portrayed at that time. Although the bulk of the textual analysis contained in *Jose Can You See?* deals with plays and media that were created before the 1980s, Sanchez includes a section that details the works of Latina playwrights, AIDS theatre, and the construction of bilingual identities.

The State of Latino Theatre, an edited collection of twelve essays published in 2002, is another work that influences this project. Among the twelve contributing authors are Alberto-Sandoval Sanchez, Jossiana Arroyo, and Tamara Underiner. Underiner's

contribution to the collection is of particular interest to this project as she discusses at length the perceptions of audiences (which she dubs the “tourist mindset”) to Latinx theatre. Arroyo’s contribution is also of interest because it details racial dynamics amongst the Puerto-Rican theatre community. Arroyo analyzes the text of Javier Cardona’s “You Don’t Look Like” in order to dive deeper into her topic, an approach that proves useful in the latter stages of this project.

By examining the various strands of historiography and previous scholarship that inform this project, one is more able to locate areas that need to be addressed in future scholarship, some of which this project strives to fill. Among these are the time period of the 1980s and 1990s. While some of the works above touch on this period, the literature on it is scant.

PRIMARY SOURCE BASE

The primary source material utilized in this project consists of many different sources. Foremost among these are newspaper articles, some of which contain interviews with key people involved in either the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre and some of which contain reviews by theatre critics.

In addition to the newspaper articles, this project also draws upon a sizable store of archival material located in the New York Public Library. Among these sources are numerous programs created by the PRTT which contain biographical information on cast members, directors, and playwrights, as well as history about the PRTT and upcoming

events for the season. This material also provides an interesting glimpse into the day-to-day operations of the PRTT through documents such as memos between the personnel of the PRTT, contracts between the PRTT and community organizations, and a wide range of letters.

In addition to contemporary media, another form of source material that this project utilizes is scripts that have been produced (or created by) this company. By analyzing these scripts common themes will emerge. Through an analysis of the similarities that these seemingly disparate plays contain a case can be made that Latinx theatre draws upon similar themes despite superfluous differences of nationality. Some of the playwrights that appear in this project are Rene Marques, Eduardo Gallardo, Rob Santana, and Candido Tirado. Each playwright will be discussed in terms of one show that was produced by the PRTT during this period. Synthesizing the information gained from the scripts themselves with that contained in the newspaper accounts and the interviews will provide a wealth of opportunities to make pan-Latinx connections between these artists and their work.

From an examination of three distinct yet interrelated varieties of primary source material, this project finds ample evidence to support the thesis that Latinx theatre in the 1980 and 1990s created a community that transcended differences of nationality. This will be seen in the struggle of the company to obtain funds and spaces, how the company (and its work) was perceived by the larger public, the content of the work itself, and the goals/missions of the company.

In terms of my theoretical approach, the biggest influence on this project is Natalia Molina and her work *How Race is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts*. In this text, the author compares the rhetoric surrounding various racial groups and how this rhetoric (which the author dubs “racial scripts”) changes over time. An important aspect of these scripts (particularly in the first chapter of my work) is their ability to refer to more than one racialized group and their utility in othering various groups perceived as non-White, such as Latinx people.

CHAPTER ONE

In the year 1898 the United States seized control of what had been the Spanish colony of Puerto Rico. Following this event, relations between the U.S. and the island became more entwined and in most cases more predatory. U.S. corporations began to exploit the island and its people as commodities, while politicians and others on the mainland stereotyped Puerto Ricans as unassimilable while attempting to fit them into a strict racial hierarchy meant to maintain Anglo-Saxon whiteness as the telos of human existence. Due to this stereotyping and dehumanization (examined here in the context of Puerto Ricans in New York City) Puerto Ricans found themselves forced to reckon with economic and political struggles as they sought to negotiate their status as citizens of the United States.

Dating back to at least the late 18th century, people from the island of Puerto Rico have traveled to what is today the mainland United States. Prior to 1898, these travelers were often students seeking an education at an American institution, wealthy merchants maintaining trade connections in cities such as Boston or New York, and/or political exiles seeking to undermine Spanish colonial rule from afar. These politically conscious Puerto Ricans joined pro-Cuban independence groups in order to facilitate the eventual break with Spain that both colonies desired. In 1898, it appeared that their hopes were to

be answered. Following a brief war in which a dozen U.S. troops died, Puerto Rico (along with Cuba, Guam, and the Philippines) found itself under the care of the United States. Despite an initial burst of enthusiasm (and in some cases cooperation with the U.S. occupation) the continued control of the island exercised by the U.S. and the economic hardships that accompanied it turned the majority of Puerto Ricans against their newest oppressors.¹

As U.S. control of the island persisted, the question of the island's status (and that of its people) became a pressing concern. In a series of Supreme Court cases, known as the Insular Cases, Puerto Rico was deemed to be "foreign in a domestic sense."² Prior to the acquisition of the island territories it received as a result of the Spanish-American War, the United States had always annexed new territories with the intention of granting them statehood. But following the aftermath of 1898, these expectations were modified (specifically through the Foraker Act, which imposed a tariff on goods from Puerto Rico) as the United States began to exert ownership over the island without extending a path to statehood.³ The vague language of these decisions left the status of Puerto Ricans open for debate; were they citizens in a foreign sense or foreigners in an American sense? Was there even a difference? This liminal status became solidified in the jurisprudence of the United States in the *Downes v. Bidwell* case which saw the Supreme Court define Puerto Rico as a territory of the United States without placing the expectation of incorporation

¹ Juan Gonzalez, *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America* (New York: Viking, 2000), 83.

² Cesar J. Ayala and Rafael Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century: A History Since 1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 27.

³ Ayala and Bernabe, *American Century*, 26-27.

into the Union on the island.⁴ In 1917, after almost two decades of U.S. domination of the island, Congress passed the Jones Act which granted United States citizenship to Puerto Ricans. However, the granting of citizenship did not automatically secure a place of equality for Puerto Ricans who chose to migrate to the U.S.

With the granting of citizenship came further questions regarding its overall benefits and/or consequences for the Puerto Rican population. For nationalists who were agitating for independence, the granting of citizenship was a bribe offered from the U.S. government in order to foster a sense of dependency between the island and the mainland.⁵ For others, the extension of citizenship to Puerto Ricans was a sign that the island was approaching statehood and would soon gain the representation in Congress that came with that status. On the mainland, politicians such as New York Congressman Vito Marcantonio sought to capitalize on the voting power granted to these migrants by lobbying for Puerto Rican independence throughout the 1930's and offering to represent nationalists who were arrested during a demonstration in the island town of Ponce.⁶ In return for his vociferous support of Puerto Rican initiatives, Marcantonio was elected to nine consecutive terms in the House of Representatives before his reputation was tarnished during the Red Scare of the 1950's.⁷

⁴ Ayala and Bernabe, *American Century*, 27.

⁵ Edgardo Meléndez, *Sponsored Migration: The State and Puerto Rican Postwar Migration to the United States* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2017), 17.

⁶ Lorrin Thomas, *Puerto Rican Citizen: History and Political Identity in Twentieth-Century New York City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 123.

⁷ James Jennings and Monte Rivera, *Puerto Rican Politics in Urban America* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1984), 45.

As Marcantonio's career suggests, the granting of citizenship opened the way for more Puerto Rican participation in U.S. politics. Beginning with the politically minded individuals who joined anti-Spanish clubs in the late nineteenth century, Puerto Ricans continued to organize politically in the decades following the Jones Act. Recent arrivals to New York City were often greeted at the docks by members of the Democratic Party machine who dominated politics in the city through a system of patronage.⁸ While the population of Puerto Ricans in New York remained small during the first two decades after the Jones Act, the community was still a significant political actor. Drawing on a long tradition of unionizing on the island, these migrants (many of whom worked as cigar makers or in factories) were enthusiastic supporters of unions. During the 1950's and 1960's, the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) was rocked by accusations of racial inequality that were led by Puerto Rican and African-American union members.⁹ Despite the publicity surrounding these accusations and the subsequent hearings that followed, Thomas writes that this coalitional effort to improve working conditions did not achieve the systemic change that Puerto Ricans and African-Americans were hoping for.¹⁰ Rather, it resulted in increasing unemployment, an overall lowering of wages, and the continuation of discriminatory practices in the union.¹¹ Interestingly, the leadership of the ILGWU focused on the gender disparity that was present among Puerto Rican workers in particular as a justification for the uneven

⁸ Thomas, *Citizen*, 41.

⁹ Thomas, *Citizen*, 188.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

leadership opportunities that were granted to Puerto Ricans.¹² To avoid the accusations of racism (a claim that was viewed as particularly damaging given the ILGWU's reputation as an anti-racist union) union leaders defended their positions with sexist logic that replayed old notions of women being too focused on the maintenance of their homes to be full participants in union leadership.

While interracial coalitions could be successful in creating change for Puerto Ricans and African-Americans, they were also vulnerable to the negative effects of what Natalia Molina terms "racial scripts."¹³ Like all minority ethnic groups in the city, Puerto Ricans found themselves situated in a complex racial hierarchy with fluid boundaries between groups. Throughout the early decades of the twentieth century, Puerto Ricans were often pitted against Blacks, Italians, Jews, and other ethnic groups primarily for government funding. According to Sonia Song Ha Lee, tensions were particularly marked between the African-American community and Puerto Ricans in the decades immediately following the Jones Act. During that time, many African-Americans were fleeing the Jim Crow South as part of the Great Migration into Northern cities such as New York. Like their Puerto Rican contemporaries, these migrants were viewed by the receiving population as potentially criminal, lazy, and not invested in their new surroundings.¹⁴ As the victims of such stereotyping, finding common ground in which to advocate for political change should have been easy to accomplish. However, as Puerto Ricans and

¹² Sonia Song-Ha Lee, *Building a Latino Civil Rights Movement: Puerto Ricans, African Americans and the Pursuit of Racial Justice in New York City* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 63.

¹³ Natalia Molina, *How Race is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 21-22.

¹⁴ Lee, *Latino*, 23-25.

Blacks began to form coalitional groups to press the city government for more funding (especially during the New Deal era when federal funds were distributed in an abundant supply) tensions continued to arise. While the Puerto Rican population of the city was not insignificant, their numbers were dwarfed by the African-Americans residing in the city. With a limited amount of government dollars to allocate (and seemingly endless problems plaguing the two groups in areas such as housing, education, access to healthcare, and high rates of unemployment), Puerto Ricans often felt that they were not getting the funds that they were entitled to.

Despite the racially induced tensions between Puerto Ricans and African-Americans, these two groups did manage to make some notable gains, particularly in the area of education. Beginning in the 1940's, Puerto Rican children were determined by mainstream educators to have disproportionately higher rates of mental retardation.¹⁵ This view (yet another example of the transferrable nature of racial scripts from Blacks to Puerto Ricans) was strengthened by the results of a monolingual IQ test (conducted in English, of course) which "proved" that Black and Puerto Rican children were less intelligent than their Caucasian peers.¹⁶ Even as IQ tests began to fall out of favor as a means of assessing children's ability to learn, the damage had already been done as "psychologists' characterization of black and Puerto Rican children as "culturally maladjusted" and "emotionally troubled" led most white educators to continue believing that black and Puerto Rican students' low IQ scores reflected some type of inferiority...".

¹⁵ Lee, *Latino*, 165.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ As Lee writes in *Building a Latino Civil Rights Movement*, these tests were vehemently condemned by Puerto Rican and African-American parents for their inherent biases towards middle-class, Caucasian, and English-speaking children.¹⁸

Faced with an education system that was designed to reinforce and recycle racial scripts that placed Black and Puerto Rican people at the bottom of society, the parents of students of color were highly motivated to redesign the system and fix its inherent flaws. To do so, these parents would join together and agitate for causes that were important to them. Their methods were similar to those deployed by civil rights activists in the early 1960's (such as a 1964 boycott of the city's schools) but the results were not as impressive. Lee writes that the boycott did increase awareness of Black and Puerto Rican parents' dissatisfaction with the school system, but that it did not alter the segregationist reality of said system.¹⁹ For example, in the 1960's a coalition of Black and Puerto Rican parents successfully demonstrated against increased municipal control of their school district.²⁰ Citing issues of representation within the faculty and staff of the school (not enough teachers of color, white teachers treating their students as criminals, etc.) as well as a lack of bilingual education, these vocal parents were able to gain a modicum of control over their schools and institute the city's first bilingual education program in 1968.²¹

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Lee, *Latino*, 166.

¹⁹ Lee, *Latino*, 172.

²⁰ Lee, *Latino*, 201.

²¹ Lee, *Latino*, 191.

Racial scripting also occurred between Puerto Ricans and immigrant groups. Although the Jones Act granted citizenship to all Puerto Ricans, the discourse surrounding these new Americans remained tied to the discourse used to describe previous European immigrants. When remarking on the abject poverty experienced by these migrants, media outlets would declare that such economic struggles were the norm for all new immigrant groups, that once the Puerto Rican had had enough time, he too would assimilate and climb the economic ladder like his Polish and Italian forebears.²² Comparisons between Puerto Ricans and Italians were particularly common during the twentieth century. For example, Leonard Covello (the founder and principal of a racially integrated school in the 1930's) conducted a survey which concluded (unsurprisingly, given the persistence and adaptability of racial scripts that Molina points out) that Puerto Ricans were facing the exact same struggles as the previous wave of Italian and Jewish immigrants.²³ As the twentieth century wore on with no significant increase in the economic outlook of Puerto Ricans, some commentators (such as Mayor William O'Dwyer) continued to make these comparisons, insisting that Puerto Ricans just needed more time to adjust to mainland life.²⁴ For other observers, this situation pointed to something endemic to the Puerto Ricans themselves: the culture of poverty.²⁵ According to these people, Puerto Ricans were simply stuck in a culture of poverty (much like African-Americans) who had become dependent on the welfare of the U.S. government in order to survive. Beginning in the 1950's, the East side of Harlem became synonymous

²² Lee, *Latino*, 30.

²³ Thomas, *Citizen*, 200-201.

²⁴ Lee, *Latino*, 56.

²⁵ Ayala and Bernabe, *American Century*, 206.

with Puerto Ricans and was referred to as “El Barrio.”²⁶ Shortly thereafter, El Barrio became a “chief example of ghetto culture” and the backdrop to the “culture of poverty” myth.²⁷ The Puerto Ricans had large families on the island and, of course, this behavior continued once they arrived on the mainland. Because the island was a mere 2,000 miles away, Puerto Ricans had no incentive to assimilate or make the United States their home; they could always return to their island. To make matters worse, these migrants could send for their family members back home to join them in America, which exacerbated and fed into the culture of poverty. All of these factors combined to keep the Puerto Rican, unlike their more industrious predecessors from faraway Europe, mired in an unending cycle of impoverishment.

The cultural deficiencies of the Puerto Rican migrants were canonized in sociological studies such as *Beyond the Melting Pot*, written by Nathaniel Glazer and Daniel Moynihan. In this text, the authors highlighted the Puerto Ricans’ seeming lack of “organizing traditions in New York” while offering internal self-help as an acceptable alternative to the politically minded demonstrations that were being undertaken by the African-American community.²⁸ Not only did Puerto Ricans in New York have a history of organizing for political purposes, they also had a rich theatre tradition (along with other forms of vibrant cultural expression, such as music) which dated back to the 19th century.²⁹ In 1811, the first recorded performance by a traveling theatre company in

²⁶ Arlene Dávila, *Barrio Dreams : Puerto Ricans, Latinos, and the Neoliberal City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 13.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Ayala and Bernabe, *American Century*, 206.

²⁹ Cortés, Eladio, Mirta Barrea-Marlys, and Inc NetLibrary. *Encyclopedia of Latin American Theater* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2003), 400.

Puerto Rico took place in San Juan.³⁰ Six decades later, a professional theatre company was formed on the island which toured throughout Puerto Rico and other Spanish territories.³¹

Scholarly treatment such as Moynihan and Glazer provided paved the way for the deployment of racial scripts to define the issues confronting Puerto Rican migrants. Instead of examining the underlying societal causes of the poverty confronting Puerto Rican migrants, commentators in the mid-twentieth century shifted the discourse to a “Puerto Rican problem.”³² According to Ayalla and Bernabe, “many observers saw the migrants’ persistent poverty as the product of some alleged Puerto Rican cultural particularity, such as the illusion of a future return to the island, fatherless families, overprotective mothers, or Hispanic aversion to labor.”³³ When examining the content of the “Puerto Rican problem” one can see Molina’s concept of racial scripts as it applies to the Puerto Rican community. While these various aspects of the “Puerto Rican problem” were directed at Puerto Ricans in the historical moment of the 1960’s, they have also been directed at other racialized groups. The emphasis on “fatherless families” and an “aversion to labor” are two scripts that are consistently hurled at Mexican and African-American people to this day.

In addition to the increasing association of Puerto Rican migration with racial scripts that had been and would be connected to Mexican immigrants and African-Americans, *Beyond the Melting Pot* also disseminated a grossly inaccurate view

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

of Puerto Rican history in New York City. While the authors of *Beyond the Melting Pot* claimed that there were no “organizing traditions” in the Puerto Rican community, Puerto Ricans in the early twentieth century were politically active. In 1918 Bernardo Vega (a Puerto Rican intellectual) helped form “the first Puerto Rican committee of the New York Socialist Party.”³⁴ Puerto Rican residents of the city also formed other politically active organizations such as the Alianza Obrera Puertorriqueña and the Porto Rican Brotherhood of America.³⁵ These organizations were concerned with a broad range of political issues dealing with conditions on the island and in the mainland community or Barrio. As the name suggests, the Alianza Obrera Puertorriqueña was a primarily Puerto Rican organization that was also concerned with the plight of workers in general. As Thomas shows, Puerto Rican migrants were politically minded and endeavored to participate in their political milieu from the early twentieth century and beyond. This history of political participation is a telling example of how racial scripts proliferate in the face of historical facts that provide more nuance than the “truth” that the scripts purport to represent.

The culture of poverty myth highlights several issues that colored the Puerto Rican experience in New York City. The emphasis on large families was a particularly crucial component that had major ramifications for Puerto Ricans, especially in terms of pathologizing Puerto Ricans. During the 1920s and 30s, Puerto Rico’s population growth was increasingly viewed as a problem in need of a solution. Following WWII, Puerto

³⁴ Thomas, *Citizen*, 30.

³⁵ Thomas, *Citizen*, 31.

Ricans began an airborne migration to the United States.³⁶ The factors behind the migration were a combination of “push” and “pull” incentives from both the government of Puerto Rico and the American industrial sector. Puerto Ricans were lured to the United States with promises of plentiful jobs and contracts negotiated by the government of the island. Like other Latinx groups, Puerto Ricans were highly sought out as a low cost alternative to the residents of the mainland. The Puerto Rican government’s migration policy was crafted deliberately with the needs of American employers first and the migrants second. For the employers, they were gaining a labor force that was virtually guaranteed by the Puerto Rican government. For the migrants, they were supposed to be receiving set wages, guaranteed working hours, room and board, and airfare to and from the island.³⁷ Despite the contractual obligations, often these contracts were not honored by the employers.³⁸ For example, in Michigan a group of Puerto Ricans raised numerous complaints with their employment in the beet fields. The laborers vociferously stated that their pay was not commensurate with what they were promised and that multiple deductions were being made from their pay under the guise of compensation for their airfare.³⁹

One primary aspect of the migration was the targeting of women of child-bearing age. In order to hinder the growth of the Puerto Rican population on the island, it was believed to be necessary to send women to the United States. These female migrants

³⁶ Gonzalez, *Harvest*, 81.

³⁷ Carmen Teresa Whalen and Víctor Vázquez-Hernández, *Puerto Rican Diaspora: Historical Perspectives* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005) 131.

³⁸ Whalen and Vázquez-Hernández, *Diaspora*, 132.

³⁹ Meléndez, *Sponsored*, 174-176.

brought skills that they had acquired on the island (particularly needle work) and were employed as “piece workers” in New York City. While the women who migrated to New York City were obviously not contributing to the population of the island, they were contributing to its economic well-being through the sending of remittances from their wages back to the island. In addition to the remittances that they were sending back, female migrants also became important links in the chain migration system. Often times, these initial migrants would invite more of their family members and close friends from the island to New York City, helping them secure employment, providing money for their airfare, and helping them adjust to life in the city.

The chain migration network facilitated the maintenance of a “boarder system.”⁴⁰ Unlike typical residential patterns in the United States, wherein two parents reside in a home with their immediate children, the boarder system established by Puerto Ricans consisted of heterogeneous combinations of family, friends, business associates, and former neighbors from the island that needed a place to live. These arrangements were usually temporary and chaotic, with the comings and goings of potential boarders an unknown variable in the lives of Puerto Ricans in the city.⁴¹ Due to the economic circumstances which precipitated the creation of the boarder system, these living arrangements were also categorized as yet another symptom of the culture of poverty that seemingly afflicted every Puerto Rican migrant and further legitimized their pathologization in the eyes of the host society.

⁴⁰ Virginia E. Sánchez Korrol, *From Colonia to Community: The History of Puerto Ricans in New York City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 102.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

As the twentieth century progressed, racial minorities began to agitate for greater liberties and rights. In the 1950s and 60s, civil rights activists in the South began to organize and successfully pursue greater equality. Inspired by the example of these activists, minority groups across the country began to join in the movement for greater equality. This resulted in the formation of a Chicano movement in the American Southwest and a Puerto Rican movement in New York City. During the height of the civil rights movement, a group of young Puerto Ricans formed a chapter of the Young Lords Organization in New York City. During their short lifespan as an organization, (1969-74), the Young Lords became masterful at gaining the attention of local media outlets. Through dramatic protests such as the garbage offensive and the occupation of a church, the Young Lords brought a great deal of media attention to the Puerto Rican community in the city. Despite the attention that they gained, the Young Lords were not able to create long lasting change in El Barrio. In their garbage offensive, for example, the Young Lords and volunteers from El Barrio literally cleaned up the streets.⁴² After several weeks of cleaning, the Young Lords and their community partners sought more cleaning supplies from the municipal government. The city, however, was unwilling to acquiesce to their demands and turned them away empty handed. Following this rejection, the Young Lords and the residents of El Barrio organized a massive protest that included blocking the streets leading into and out of Manhattan with the refuse that the

⁴² Darrel Wanzer-Serrano, *The New York Young Lords and the Struggle for Liberation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015), 123.

city refused to pick up.⁴³ Subsequently, the city promised to provide El Barrio with more reliable trash pickup, but these changes were not delivered.⁴⁴

In addition to the failure of the garbage offensive to bring about permanent change in the policies of the city, the Young Lords also attempted to force a local church to open its doors to the needs of the community.⁴⁵ While the first takeover lasted eleven days, during which the Young Lords were able to temporarily appropriate the space for their goals such as a learning center for neighborhood children, the church did not become a permanent venue for the Young Lords and their community.⁴⁶ Rather, the conservative, mostly Cuban, and staunchly Catholic congregation retained covetous control of the building and its spaces.⁴⁷ This outcome was repeated when the Young Lords once again took control of the church.⁴⁸

Into the 1980s and 1990s the Puerto Rican population continued to grow. During this period, more than 3,000,000 people per year travelled between the island and the mainland.⁴⁹ As the numbers of Puerto Ricans in the mainland United States continued to increase, the concentration of the population in New York City began to decrease from a high of eighty percent in 1950 to less than forty percent in 1990.⁵⁰ Despite this shift, the

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Wanzer-Serrano, *Lords*, 124.

⁴⁵ Wanzer-Serrano, *Lords*, 145.

⁴⁶ Wanzer-Serrano, *Lords*, 154.

⁴⁷ Wanzer-Serrano, *Lords*, 151.

⁴⁸ Wanzer-Serrano, *Lords*, 161.

⁴⁹ Tienda, Marta, Faith Mitchell, National Research Council (U.S.), Panel on Hispanics in the United States Staff, Population Committee, Committee, Transforming Our Common Destiny, Staff, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, Panel on Hispanics in the United States, National Research Council, and Committee on Population. *Hispanics and the Future of America*. Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2006. doi:10.17226/11539.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

total numbers of Puerto Ricans in the city continued to expand (exceeding 850,000 by 1990), eventually overtaking the population of San Juan.⁵¹

While the growth of the Puerto Rican population in the city is an important element to consider, it is also necessary to explain the state of the city of New York during the decades leading up to the 1980s. During the 1970s, the dramatic rise of oil prices reduced the stability of loans that were held by major New York banks.⁵² New York's financial dilemma was also exacerbated by a lack of federal and state funding to address the city's budgetary shortfalls.⁵³ As a result of their fiscal struggles, the government of New York City was forced to lay off a large portion of the police department, public school teachers, and drastically limit public services that had previously been offered to the public.⁵⁴

The saga of Puerto Ricans in New York City and in the United States more broadly is one of acceptance and rejection, difference and assimilation. Over the course of the twentieth century, Puerto Ricans went from being foreigners to citizens. This important distinction also initiated a change in the physical geography of where Puerto Ricans reside. After the granting of citizenship, Puerto Ricans began to migrate to New York City in far greater numbers, spurred by the declining economy of the island and the promise of work to be had on the mainland. As the Puerto Rican population grew, these migrants found themselves stuck within a racial hierarchy that saw racial scripts being

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Jonathan Soffer. *Ed Koch and the Rebuilding of New York City*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010) 114.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Soffer, *Koch*, 115.

applied to them and their other racialized neighbors in the city. The growth of the Puerto Rican population substantially altered the discourse around Puerto Ricans as an inscrutable “problem” that would overburden the city’s welfare rolls, bring contagious diseases to the mainland, refuse to assimilate to the culture of the United States, and partake in criminal activities. These scripts played a pernicious role in the dehumanization of the Puerto Rican population. Beginning with the contract labor system, Puerto Ricans were viewed as a commodity to be brought to the mainland to promote the growth and maintenance of the U.S. economy. They were flown to the U.S. in substandard aircraft that were prone to deadly malfunctions, they were denied access to key provisions of their contracts, they were encouraged to leave their homes to deter their reproduction, and they were unwillingly forced to partake in the devaluation of their brethren and other racialized groups in the U.S. Despite all these difficulties, Puerto Rican migrants continued to make their way to the United States, continued to teach their language and culture, and continued to press for greater inclusion in the metropole.

CHAPTER TWO

Building on the shifting political and racial landscape that had formed during the Civil Rights Movement and the Chicano Movement of the 1960s, the migrants and other minority groups began to form their own artistic groups in response to this surge of activism. Groups that came about during this time include Pregones Theatre, Repertorio Español, INTAR, and the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre (PRTT). All of these companies (some more so than others) remained committed to presenting bilingual theatre to the diverse Latinx population of New York City. The PRTT played a pivotal role not only in the development of the Puerto Rican community in the city but also in the creation of a broader Latinx identity at large. As the PRTT continued to grow and evolve, their activities evolved as well. What began as an attempt to bring affordable, high-quality theatre to people throughout New York City's boroughs morphed into a company with a permanent space near Broadway, a training unit that was devoted to the nurturing of new dramatic talent, and an ability to put on critically acclaimed works from a wide variety of playwrights. Despite their name, the PRTT was not simply a theatre of, by, and for Puerto Ricans, but an intense collaboration with writers, actors, and artists from a multitude of theatrical, national, and racial backgrounds. As the company evolved

from its grassroots beginnings to a more sophisticated organization, it increased its experimentation and its use of Latinx writers, directors, and performers, thus helping to forge links between the disparate Latinx nationalities. From its humble beginnings the PRTT transformed into a forum for the expression and formation of Latinx identity in New York City.

FOUNDATIONS OF THE COMPANY

In 1967, the PRTT was founded by Puerto Rican actress Miriam Colon. Initially, the company was formed with the sole intention of providing bilingual theatre to the Puerto Rican community of New York City.⁵⁵ To that end, the PRTT scheduled performances across the boroughs of New York to take place during the summer. These performances were free of charge (making them accessible to anyone who wished to see them) and they went into the very heart of these communities. When formulating the concept that would become the PRTT, Colon drew on her own experiences in Puerto Rico where she had taken part in a touring theatre that performed throughout the island.⁵⁶ Unlike more traditional theatres (such as the Broadway and Off-Broadway houses) the PRTT did not have an established home. Wherever an audience could be found (and a municipal permit obtained) the PRTT would perform. For Colon, performing plays in Spanish and English was an essential element of the PRTT that enabled it to make a broader impact on the Puerto Rican community of the city.

⁵⁵ Elisa De La Roche, *Teatro Hispano! Three Major New York Companies* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1995), 59.

⁵⁶ De La Roche, *Teatro*, 60.

Part of this impact was defined by Colon herself when attempting to secure a grant from the city. Colon articulated the following goals in the late 1960s:

1. Promote identification and self esteem in alienated ethnic minorities.
2. Increase understanding and tolerance between the different national and ethnic groups
3. Bring free, high-quality entertainment to neighborhoods which cannot afford to pay Broadway or Off-Broadway prices
4. Provide constructive outlet for boredom, restlessness and frustration
5. Be a source of wholesome entertainment and cultural enrichment for the community. in general, and it's deprived areas specifically
6. Offer community participation, vocational opportunity and talent development to our youth.⁵⁷

While most theatre companies have goals and/or mission statements that they adhere to, the PRTT's goals were unique for several reasons. First, the overall tone of the goals is similar to the uplift rhetoric that W.E.B. Dubois and others championed in the African-American community. For all of the problems that Colon is seeking to address in these goals, no mention is made of what causes them or what systemic problems lead to their continued existence. Another important aspect of the goals is their focus on ethnic minorities. During the 1960s, the United States was undergoing a dramatic shift in race relations which changed how ethnic minorities were perceived and treated by the dominant society. The phrasing of the first point is particularly intriguing. It suggests that ethnic minorities define themselves through the art that they produce and that these projects can (and should) be a source of self-esteem for the community. When examining

⁵⁷ De La Roche, *Teatro*, 62.

this first goal in the context of the culture of poverty myth and other denigrating stereotypes that skewed the perception of Puerto Ricans, it seems quite obvious that Colon and the other members of the PRTT were claiming that the theatre of Puerto Rico (and the larger Latinx world) was worthy of the respect and recognition which had been denied to Latinx people in the U.S. for decades.

Early on, the PRTT was true to its name, with most of its early productions coming from Puerto Rican playwrights such as Rene Marques. The first production of the PRTT was Marques' *The Oxcart* which tells the story of one family moving from the countryside of Puerto Rico, to San Juan, to New York City.⁵⁸ This production marked the first time that *The Oxcart* was performed in the English language and established the precedent of performing plays in both Spanish and English that the company would continue to follow throughout the rest of the century. During its early years (dubbed the Traveling Unit by De La Roche) the PRTT was limited to performing during the summer months.⁵⁹ Without a permanent home the company could not perform during the winter months due to the prohibitively cold temperatures that prevailed in the city.⁶⁰ Another drawback to performing exclusively outdoors was the limited space for artistic innovation that the stage (a flatbed truck) permitted, due in part to the competition with other noises in the city that intruded on the performances.⁶¹ Due to this unfavorable situation, Colon continued to advocate for acquiring a physical space to host the PRTT year-round that would allow people to come to the theatre regardless of the weather. In 1971, the PRTT

⁵⁸ De La Roche, *Teatro*, 62.

⁵⁹ De La Roche, *Teatro*, 60.

⁶⁰ De La Roche, *Teatro*, 66.

⁶¹ De La Roche, *Teatro*, 64.

found a space in the Chelsea district that it was able to use for performances. De La Roche terms this period from 1971-1979 the Laboratory Theater.⁶² As the name suggests, this period of the PRTT's existence saw it mature into a theatre company capable of performing more intricate pieces that expanded the PRTT's repertoire along with their reputation amongst theatre critics and the more traditional theatre-going crowd. Prior to the acquisition of this space, the PRTT typically produced farces by Spanish or Puerto Rican playwrights with simple plots and recognizable character types.⁶³ Having a stationary theatre to perform in permitted the PRTT to produce more complex pieces such as *The Doctor In Spite of Himself* by Moliere (the first classic play produced by the company), *Los Soles Truncos* by Rene Marques (a production that saw Miriam Colon play one of the title characters), and *Simpson Street* by Eduardo Gallardo.⁶⁴ During this period, the PRTT also became more organizationally complex as it added the Training Unit (a school for young people who wished to pursue theatre professionally), maintained the summer tours that it had put on since its inception, and continued to perform high-quality, bilingual plays in its stationary space.

FULFILLING ITS GOALS IN THE 80'S AND 90'S

While the PRTT continued to develop and evolve during the 1970s, the subject matter of the majority of its productions were dominated by depictions of the Puerto Rican migrant experience. Plays during this period depicted the tenements that some Puerto Rican migrants lived in, the pursuit of the American Dream (which, when

⁶² De La Roche, *Teatro*, 67.

⁶³ De La Roche, *Teatro*, 64-65.

⁶⁴ De La Roche, *Teatro*, 70, 80-81.

compared to the “success” stories of other migrants and immigrants from Europe, seemed to a futile struggle against generational poverty) and the struggle between assimilating to mainland society and maintaining links to the culture of the island. During the 1980s, the PRTT continued to produce works pertaining to the Puerto Rican experience in the mainland, but more and more of its productions expanded into other areas. For example, in 1982 the PRTT produced Jose Ruibal’s play *The Man and The Fly* about a dictator (in an unspecified country) who attempts to groom a barber to be his ideal successor.⁶⁵ Another play that the PRTT put on during the 1980s was *Death Shall Not Enter the Palace*, a thinly veiled critique of Luis Munoz and the creation of the Free Associated State in Puerto Rico. The play features stand-ins for notable figures in Puerto Rico’s history such as Luis Munoz, the first Puerto Rican governor of the island, and Albizu Campos, the nationalist leader who advocated for independence as an alternative to the prevailing relationship with the United States.

When examining the productions that the PRTT put on during the 1980s and 1990s, it is clear that this company was committed to the goal of increasing self-esteem for all ethnic and racial minorities. This inclusive mission also extended to the nationalities of playwrights, directors, and actors who were employed by the PRTT. The PRTT continued to put on shows that were written by Puerto Ricans, Spaniards, Argentinians, Mexicans, Germans, and other national groups. In one production (*Los Soles Truncos*), the PRTT cast Carmen Zapata, a well-known actress of Mexican descent who helped found the Bilingual Foundation of the Arts in Los Angeles, alongside Miriam

⁶⁵ De La Roche, *Teatro*, 85.

Colon and Elia Enid Cadilla, a Latinx actress that performed in Colombia, the Dominican Republic, and Spain in addition to the United States.⁶⁶ This show, written by a Puerto Rican, was directed by Margarita Galban, a director whose career began as an actress in radio and television in her native Cuba, who then moved to Mexico and Argentina where she worked as an actress.⁶⁷ This production in particular is a great example of how connected the Latinx theatre community (and Latinx community in general) was becoming during the decades following the Civil Rights Movement. *Los Soles Truncos* is just one of potentially dozens of examples of PRTT productions that utilized diverse members of the Latinx community, but this production is especially important because of the close collaboration that occurred between the PRTT and the Bilingual Foundation of the Arts, two companies operating on different sides of the country with similar goals and methods for achieving them. As a joint endeavor of the PRTT and the Bilingual Foundation of the Arts, this production illustrates how the seemingly disparate Latinx community (represented in the previous chapter by the New York Young Lords and the divisive politics that resulted in its creation) came together during the last two decades of the twentieth century.

The next goal also deserves attention for a variety of reasons. In conjunction with the first point discussed above, this second goal further illustrates how committed the PRTT was to all ethnic minorities. From its very beginnings, the PRTT was a theatre company that was focused on improving the lot of ethnic minorities, not only in their

⁶⁶ Program for *Los Soles Truncos*, 1980, Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre records (PRTT), 671165 b. 2 f. 1, The New York Public Library.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

perception by the dominant society but also in the way that these groups interacted with each other. The second point demonstrates that the founders and participants of the PRTT in its early stages were aware of the stereotypes that had been rescripted to fit Puerto Ricans since gaining their status as US citizens. Another facet of the second point that relates to the Puerto Rican experience on the island and in the mainland is the multiple ethnicities that were encompassed by the term “Puerto Rican.” Ever since the passage of the Jones Act, Americans on the mainland struggled to classify Puerto Ricans in the rigid hierarchy of race that had been established over the past century. Despite its relatively small size, Puerto Rico contained a startling variety of racial minorities and Puerto Ricans themselves often fit into multiple categories, two factors that perpetually frustrated government officials and others seeking to racially classify Puerto Ricans.

The second point also indirectly relates to the concept of racial scripts by counteracting the toxic inter-ethnic relations that racial scripts depend upon. Rather than stating that Puerto Ricans are the most important Latinx group (or that Latinx groups are the most important minority group in the country), the PRTT is seeking a broad base of inclusion through theatre that leads to an increase in self-esteem amongst *all* ethnic groups and subsequently as a means to increase tolerance between *all* ethnic groups. From its conception, the PRTT was envisioned as a means of subverting the very tense (and sometimes violent) inter-ethnic relations that had accompanied the increase of Puerto Rican migration in the decades following the Second World War. The PRTT was intended as a force for the creation of harmonious relations between the various ethnic and racial groups that had hitherto been marked by contention and hostility.

The mission of the PRTT also went beyond racial/ethnic causes. The fifth point discusses the importance of bringing high-quality theatre to “deprived areas”; neighborhoods that do not have theatres and whose residents lack the high amount of disposable income required to see a Broadway show. Whether Colon and the other members of the PRTT envisioned the audiences of these mobile performances as strictly Puerto Rican or Latinx is unclear. Based on the first two points which highlight increasing identity, self-esteem, and tolerance among all ethnic minorities it seems unlikely that the “deprived areas” mentioned in the fifth point were intended to be exclusively Puerto Rican or Latinx. In addition to its broad focus on ethnic minorities, the PRTT was also committed to the cultural enrichment of people living in “deprived areas.” The language employed by the PRTT at this time is reminiscent of the discourse surrounding the education of Puerto Ricans and African-Americans in the years prior to the founding of the PRTT. In the case of the PRTT, they are using the term “deprived” in a way that echoes the discourse of the “culturally deprived” racial script that was assigned to Puerto Ricans earlier in the twentieth century. Something (whether it be economic, cultural, or intellectual) is deficient in these neighborhoods and needs to be corrected.

Based on the fourth point, it seems clear that the members of the PRTT were convinced that the residents of these neighborhoods were not engaging in culturally uplifting or productive behaviors. By offering itself as a productive outlet to these communities, the PRTT is playing to the stereotypes of the urban ghetto, which could be interpreted as a necessary strategy when soliciting funds from the city. By positioning

itself as a cure for the urban blight that had been plaguing the city for decades, the PRTT was attempting to justify its mission (which was built on the radical notion of racial harmony) as a solution for one of the biggest problems facing the city.

EXPANDING ORGANIZATIONAL COMPLEXITY

In addition to its seeming willingness to use the language of the dominant society to secure funding, the PRTT also showed a tendency to move away from its initial goal of providing theatre to people in “deprived areas.” Beginning in the 1980s, the PRTT was able to secure a permanent space in an abandoned fire station located near the Broadway district that they had consciously differentiated themselves from in earlier years. This change marked a shift in the PRTT’s priorities as the travelling aspect of the theatre became secondary to the more grandiose productions that were being mounted in their new home. Along with the new space came a new demand for funding. Program after program from the 1980s shows the close relationship between the theatre company and corporate sponsors who were eager to cash in on the ever growing presence of the Latinx dollar.⁶⁸ Some of the more prominent sponsors of the PRTT during this era were American Airlines, Chemical Bank, a large financial institution located primarily in New York City, and Avon, the makeup marketer.⁶⁹

In addition to the sponsorships of large corporations, the PRTT also sought relationships with prominent New Yorkers such as mayor Koch and governor Cuomo, both of whom sent their congratulations to the PRTT on the occasion of their twentieth

⁶⁸ Program for *Betances*, 1981, PRTT records, 671163 b. 1 f. 1, The New York Public Library.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

anniversary.⁷⁰ The relationship between the municipal government and the PRTT was a necessary one to maintain for several reasons. Firstly, the PRTT depended on the municipal government to provide its new home. The city granted the PRTT favorable terms to facilitate its activities in the space. The second aspect of the city-theatre company relationship that played a significant role over the life of the PRTT was the fact that the city controlled the granting of permits to the company for their outdoor performances. Without these permits, the PRTT would have been unable to maintain the activity that was its original inspiration: traveling. One example of this relationship is a letter dated July 13, 1982 in which Margarita Morales (Community Coordinator for the PRTT) asks Lou Carusso to issue permits for Battery Park and Riverside Park & 103rd St. Morales highlights that “The Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre is a non-profit, tax-exempt, educational organization” and that the performances are being partially funded “by public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts, The National Endowment for the Arts and the Department of Cultural Affairs of the City of New York.”⁷¹ Maintaining a positive working relationship with the municipal powers-that-be was a necessary (though paradoxical considering the history of the city government’s role in stereotyping Puerto Ricans and other ethnic minorities) aspect of the company’s continued success.

⁷⁰ Mario Cuomo to Miriam Colon, March 10, 1987, PRTT records, 671174 b. 10 f. 7, The New York Public Library and Edward Koch to Miriam Colon, March 20, 1987, PRTT records, 671174 b. 10 f. 7 The New York Public Library.

⁷¹ Margarita Morales to Lou Carusso, July, 13, 1982, PRTT records, 671169 b. 4 f. 4, The New York Public Library.

On the other side of the permit granting process, the PRTT made specific demands of those who were requesting its services. According to memos and other communications between the PRTT and its potential partners, any group wishing to host a PRTT performance would need to publicize said performance, provide a space for the performance that is accessible for an eighteen foot truck along with a source of electricity, bathroom and dressing room facilities for the actors, ten volunteers to assist in the setup and the break down of the stage, the securing of a police presence during the performance, a prohibition on gambling, music, and the sale of liquor during the performance, and guarantee a minimum audience of 300 people.⁷² In addition to the performance itself, the PRTT also agreed to provide the equipment (lights, amplifiers, etc.) necessary to perform the shows, an assistant to help the host organization with their publicity responsibilities, and programs describing the performances and the actors.⁷³ In addition to the conditions listed above, the PRTT had a verbatim message that needed to be attached to all publicity materials distributed for the show. In 1982 for example, the PRTT performed two farces by Federico Garcia Lorca during the Summer Season. The promotional materials for these performances had to include various elements such as the name of the PRTT, the names of the plays in both English and Spanish, the name of the playwright, a line stating that these were “two delightful, romantic farces with music and puppets...”, and a list of the sponsors that made the performance possible.⁷⁴ Despite the rigid requirements of the performance agreements, multiple organizations such as Casita

⁷² Performance Agreement With Casita Maria, July 20, 1982, PRTT records, 671169 b. 4 f. 4, The New York Public Library.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

Maria, St. Joseph's Church, and the Latin Exchange, decided to proceed with these productions.

Another aspect of the relationship between the PRTT and its host organizations that needs to be examined is the data collection apparatus that was maintained by the PRTT. Following the fulfillment of the performance agreement, the PRTT would record information about various aspects of the performance and the activities of the host organizations leading up to it. For example, one such document records that the Hispanic Women's Network agreed to a performance on Staten Island which was attended by 150 people and which began at 6:30 p.m.⁷⁵ The report also indicates which activities the host organization undertook to promote the event. For example, the host organization did put a notice in the local newspaper, but did not utilize a car with a loudspeaker.⁷⁶ The report covers a variety of other matters pertaining to the performance, such as the presence of seating provided by the host organization, whether police were present, and if the audience was receptive or not.⁷⁷

Also contained in the report on the Hispanic Women's Network are notes that provide a detailed understanding of how the host-PRTT relationship could play out. For each host organization that the PRTT dealt with, there was a designated contact, someone who was the intermediary between the host and the theatre. In this case, the contact person was Aurora Mojica. According to the report, Ms. Mojica agreed to distribute promotional materials ahead of the performance, but when Ms. Mojica came to collect

⁷⁵ Summer Program Report, 1982, PRTT records, 671169 b. 4 f. 4, The New York Public Library.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

them she delegated the task to a friend, Zulma Melendez.⁷⁸ Melendez did a satisfactory job in this capacity, but the author of the report determined that Ms. Mojica “acted in an irresponsible manner” and that other contacts needed to be developed for future productions on Staten Island.⁷⁹

THE TRAINING UNIT

In terms of the latter portion of its goals, the PRTT did a fantastic job of developing young theatrical talent. During the 1980s, the PRTT increased the scale of the Training Unit, which had been honing the skills of theatrically minded youths since the 1970s. The Training Unit did not have a large staff, but it was able to offer its students a variety of courses that covered important areas of theatrical production such as acting, dancing, and playwriting. Often times, the teachers of these courses were professionals who were themselves working with the PRTT on its productions throughout the season. For example, Alba Oms (who directed numerous plays through the 1980s and 1990s) lead an acting class in 1990.⁸⁰ The Training Unit would last for most of the calendar year, with applications being accepted in January, classes beginning in February, and graduation to be held during the summer.

Much like its reports on the summer productions, the PRTT kept meticulous, detailed records of the activities of the Training Unit. These range from demographic breakdowns of the student body by race and ethnicity (according to one such record for the 1990 class, a vast majority of students were categorized as “Hispanic”, eight were

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Course Description of Alba Oms, 1990, PRTT records, 671170 b. 4 f. 6, The New York Public Library.

African-American, five were Caucasian, and one was Italian) to accomplishments that the students (and their instructors) achieved during the season, to class schedules and teacher resumes.⁸¹ Enrollment in the Training Unit was limited to people between the ages of fourteen and twenty-three, but was open to anyone in the age range who wished to join. There was no tuition charged to the students, but the class sizes at the Training Unit were kept relatively small. Despite the selective admissions process, not every student was able to complete the course in the requisite time frame (two to three years from the date of admission). In addition to the typical rules that one would find in almost any classroom (coming to class on time, paying attention, not chewing gum, etc.) the Training Unit also required that its students complete fifty hours of volunteer service to the theatre.⁸² Based on the archival evidence, it appears that the fifty hours of volunteer work was a large hurdle for many of the students to get over, despite the variety of volunteer opportunities that proliferated within the PRTT.

Throughout the Training Unit, there was a focus on highlighting the accomplishments of both students and faculty. Many students earned a mention in the Training Unit newsletter which listed the accomplishments of the students and faculty. For example, several students enrolled in the acting class were listed as having participated in a short film about the AIDS epidemic.⁸³ The purpose of listing these accomplishments seems to be boosting the overall morale of those participating in the

⁸¹ Training Unit Final Report, 1991, PRTT records, 671171 b. 4 f. 8-10 The New York Public Library.

⁸² Record of Volunteer Work, 1991, PRTT records, 671170 b. 4 f. 6, The New York Public Library.

⁸³ Training Unit Midterm Report, 1991, PRTT records, 671170 b. 4 f. 6, The New York Public Library.

Training Unit. Much like the mission statement mentioned above, the Training Unit was meant as a positive force to further the PRTT's goal of creating art and increasing tolerance of ethnic minorities.

Another important aspect of the PRTT during this period was the Playwrights Workshop. As the name suggests, this was a workshop that helped professional playwrights develop their craft and improve their work. Perhaps the most fitting testament to the effectiveness of the Playwrights Workshop is the success that the playwrights found after their time with the PRTT. Alumni of the Playwrights Workshop include Federico Fraguada, Candido Tirado, Carmen Rivera, and numerous other playwrights who found success at the Off-Broadway level. In the 1990's, the Playwrights Workshop achieved exceptional recognition as their work was published in a collection edited by Jon Antush.⁸⁴ This collection marks the first ever publication of plays by Puerto Rican authors living in the mainland. All of the playwrights whose work was featured in this collection were involved in the Playwrights Workshop and most of them went on to have prolific careers in the years following the publication of the collection.

The success of the Training Unit and the Playwrights Workshop is an important milestone in the continued evolution of the PRTT. Prior to the establishment of the Playwrights Workshop, the PRTT was not involved in the creation of new work; it was merely presenting plays that come out of other times (like the pieces by Lorca, which date to before WWII or Marques, which were written shortly after) or other places (such

⁸⁴ Some Recent Accomplishments of the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre's Playwrights' Unit, 1991, PRTT records, 671174 b. 10 f. 9, The New York Public Library.

as the work of Arrabal, who wrote a vast majority of his plays in France). For the first time, the Puerto Rican community in New York had an organized school in which to hone their skills and have their voices and stories heard. The PRTT went from being a mouthpiece for writers educated elsewhere to an important source of contemporary Puerto Rican art and new work. These new works and playwrights helped establish the PRTT as a forum for issues that were important in the lives of young Latinx people. These new works also continued the commitment to the six goals that Miriam Colon had elaborated earlier by presenting works by and about ethnic/racial minorities that were then made accessible via the PRTT's performing apparatus. By producing these new works, the PRTT was also creating opportunities for more nuanced portrayals of Latinx people onstage that were farther removed from the stereotypical portrayals that dominated mainstream media.

CONCLUSION

As the years passed, the PRTT continued to do what it had done since its inception: provide the people of New York City with high quality theatre in both Spanish and English, regardless of race, ethnicity, class, or location. While its activities were limited to the summer months during its first years of existence, the company managed to rise from those humble beginnings and claim a space of its own in the Chelsea area of the city. With the acquisition of an indoor performance space, the PRTT began to flex its creative muscles and produce more ambitious shows during the non-summer months. Finally, in the 1980s, the PRTT found a permanent home in an abandoned firehouse near the center of the theatrical universe: Broadway. During this time of change, the PRTT

clung tightly to its goals enumerated above, by continuing to tour the city, presenting plays that highlighted the migrant experience and the experiences of Latinx people in general, and expanding the scope of the Training Unit, all at little to no cost for those receiving it. To do this, the PRTT needed to find funding and establish close relationships with city officials. It also needed to expand the bureaucratic side of its operations by creating detailed reports and records about all of its activities. From its beginnings in the 1960s, to its maturation and growth in the 1990s, the PRTT continued to expand its artistic repertoire, expand the scope and reach of the Training Unit, and to address the changing needs of the Latinx community in New York City.

CHAPTER THREE

During the 1980s and 1990s, the PRTT became a proponent for a greater Latinx identity, one that did not distinguish between nationality, ethnicity, or race. Over this period, the PRTT remained committed to presenting portrayals of Latinx people that did not conform to the negative racial scripts that had been ascribed to them. Both the characters in these plays and the people responsible for creating them demonstrate a more nuanced view of Latinx people than the stereotypes of Latinx people permit. Over the course of these decades, the PRTT produced and encouraged the creation of new works by Puerto Rican playwrights. These plays however, managed to make an impact and resonate with audiences in both English and Spanish, and across the varying nationalities of Latinx peoples. In both the themes and the productions themselves, the artists of the PRTT created a forum for the expression of a pan-ethnic identity. Thematically, the subject matter of the plays produced during this time revolve around the unit of the family.

For the playwrights, centering their art around the concept of the family and the external forces that threaten its survival resonates with people of all Latinx nationalities.

Like many immigrant groups, Latinx people used family as a means of anchoring their identity and sense of self while in a foreign land. In the early twentieth century, this was particularly prevalent amongst the Puerto Rican community as the growing prevalence of migration resulted in “chain migration” in which one person would relocate to be followed by immediate and extended family at a later date.⁸⁵ The chain migration system also led to more non-traditional family arrangements as the housing situation in New York City gave rise to a boarder system in which friends and acquaintances from the island would stay within a household for an indeterminate amount of time.⁸⁶ By referencing family in their work, the playwrights of the PRTT are harkening back to the importance of the family as a means of establishing community in a new place and as a means of survival for those who may not fit into the mold of the nuclear family.

While the majority of the plays focus on the family as an important unit of Latinx society, they invariably bring in elements that threaten to pervert the family structure. These elements are capitalism, or the pursuit of the American Dream, violence, which takes both domestic and external forms, urban life, often seen as a corrupting influence from without that leads to stress being placed upon the family, and gender roles, which informs the structuring of the family. Plays that will be examined are *Ariano*, *The Fanlights*, *Bomber Jackets*, *Bodega*, *Spanish Eyes*, *I Am a Winner*, *The Boiler Room*, *Simpson Street*, and *First Class*. Most of these plays were written during the 1980s and

⁸⁵Ramón E. Soto-Crespo, *Mainland Passage : The Cultural Anomaly of Puerto Rico* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 41.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*

1990s as part of the PRTT's playwrights workshop. Figure 1 shows the chronology of these plays in relation to each other.

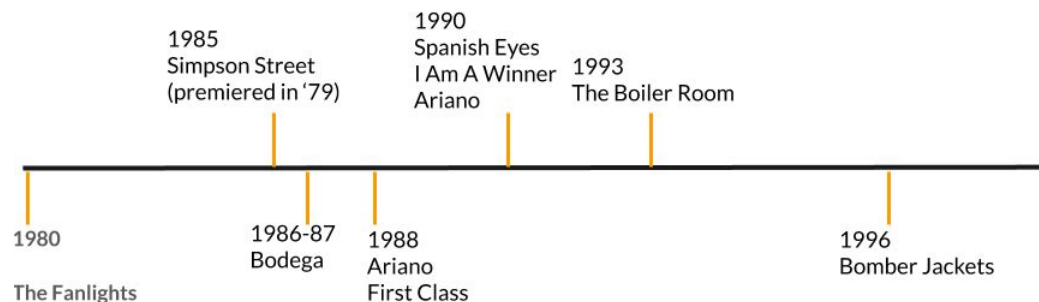


Figure 1: A timeline of the productions that are featured in this paper.

This group of plays represents the output of a distinct generation of Latinx artists who were born in the mainland and were concerned with giving voice to the experiences of people in their community. While it is true that most of the playwrights whose work is represented here are of Puerto Rican descent, the production of these plays (as well as their thematic content) indicates their universality to the Latinx community at large. The PRTT's involvement in the creation and production of these plays demonstrates a willingness to articulate a form of Latinx identity that goes beyond *Puertorriquenidad* and becomes a pan-ethnic expression based in the common experiences of racism, language and cultural barriers, and the economic struggles that accompany life in the United States as an oppressed minority. This willingness will be examined in the pages below as it pertains to the productions, both how they were constructed by the PRTT (casting, directing, etc.) and how they were perceived by audience members.

FAMILY

The most ubiquitous theme that will be examined in this chapter is that of family. For the playwrights, family is used as a microcosm of the societal circumstances (such as poverty, crime, substance abuse, etc.) which plague the Latinx community. Other issues that will be explored later on (such as urban life and capitalism) become intertwined with these depictions of the family. By utilizing portrayals of dysfunctional families, these authors (and by extension the PRTT) are illustrating the problems and issues that affect all Latinx peoples.

One of the first plays by a mainland Puerto Rican to gain widespread critical acclaim was Eduardo Gallardo's *Simpson Street*. This play was originally produced during the 1979 season and it marked a coming out of sorts for the mainland Puerto Rican community. Following the original production of *Simpson Street*, the PRTT made a conscious effort to nurture similar voices and produce similar work by diverting more resources (mainly production opportunities) to the playwrights associated with the Playwrights Workshop. This play highlights the family as a unit of Latinx society and several of the factors that can potentially bring about its demise, such as substance abuse and relations between men and women.

Six years after the initial production, *Simpson Street* was revived by the PRTT as part of the 1985 season. In 1990, John Antush summarized the significance of the play as a "popular success that cut across ethnic, even linguistic, lines established *Simpson Street*

as a high point in the movement to return the Hispanic theatre to the people...⁸⁷ The play tells the story of the Rodriguez family, (Lucy, the mother, and Angela and Michael, her children) as well as their close friends Rosa, Elva, and Sonia. The play opens with a symbolic expression of a happy family: a surprise party for Michael's homecoming. Despite this seemingly happy beginning, the play unfolds in an increasingly dark direction as the family's problems with alcohol, their inability to find stability in their relationships, and their overall lack of hope and belief that they can escape from Simpson Street itself lead to increased conflict and tension between the characters. The play is a dark comment on how the family can perpetuate negativity and become a prison-like institution that keeps people from making their own choices or from feeling good about the choices they make. An exchange between Lucy and Angela is an example of this:

ANGELA: Ma, you can't talk to him because he never listens. Never. The same way he never wants anything, he demands things. I know if I talk to him he's gonna demand that I go back to him, and I'm sorry, Ma, I am much too young to be so bored. Shit, he's even gotta bore me in my dreams.

LUCY: Angela, maybe your leaving has made him think ... has made him change... I'm telling you for your own good. You don't know what it's like to be alone.

ANGELA: What makes you such an authority on loneliness? Because Daddy left? Well the man I married might just as well have been gone. I know what it's like being alone, Ma. That's why I left him. I don't wanna end up like you.

LUCY: My life isn't exactly over. I've still got you kids ...

ANGELA: Well, I want more than that.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Gallardo, Edward and John Antush. *Simpson Street and Other Plays*. Houston, TX: Arte Público Press, 1990. 4.

⁸⁸ Gallardo and Antush, *Simpson Street*, 24.

In this passage, Angela is attempting to explain to Lucy why her relationship with her husband is unsalvageable, a fact that Angela is ready to embrace. Angela highlights her youth and expresses a desire to try new things, to not be “bored.” Lucy however, is unwilling to let Angela completely move on. Lucy’s argument in this exchange is paradoxical: she feels that her children are the one thing making her life worthwhile, but the husband who presumably gave her those children has left her and made her appear to be a failure in the eyes of her own daughter. Lucy’s failure to maintain her own marriage is a key reason why Angela is so resistant to Lucy’s idea that she should reconcile with her wayward husband Fernando.

At the conclusion of the play, Michael reveals that he is leaving to California which brings about an abrupt change in Lucy’s self-perception. “One day it’s gonna be me who leaves here. I swear it!... One day I’m gonna be the one who walks out. I’m gonna be the one who leaves.”⁸⁹ Another aspect of family that Gallardo’s play touches upon is generational conflict. This is shown most prominently in the conflict between Lucy and her children, but is also shown between Rosa and her daughter Sonia. In the case of the Rodriguez family, Lucy is trying to encourage her children to act like adults, to get married and raise families of their own. Lucy’s obsession with family causes her to encourage Angela to stay with her husband, despite the fact that her husband is emotionally and physically abusive. In the case of Rosa and Sonia, Sonia rebels against her mother by actively pursuing a relationship with a college student from Idaho. Eventually, their relationship culminates in an offer of marriage which Sonia accepts

⁸⁹ Gallardo and Antush, *Simpson Street*, 73.

against her mother's wishes. Through the author's portrayal of these two dynamics, one is given the message that family is something that is meant to be escaped. Although they go about it in different ways, each of these families attempts to hold down and control their various members.

Another play that portrays family in a negative light is *Ariano* by Richard Irizarry. In this play, Ariano is shown to be a successful businessman with a wife, Dolores, and a young son, Serafin. Despite his seemingly blessed life, Ariano is not satisfied. Unlike his wife, who is preoccupied with the status that her husband's success brings her and living her dream of being a housewife, Ariano is obsessed with the notion of race. He is disappointed by the appearance of his son (who is described by the playwright as the darkest character) and he yearns to have a white son instead. These feelings become apparent in a violent outburst that Ariano has towards his son.

ARIANO: You're gonna have to learn the difference between your colors, kid. Now! Today! Believe me, everybody out there, especially in that freakin' school, knows the difference in their colors. Nobody makes a mistake about that!...No more black! No brown! That's the color of dirt and shit!... Bright colors, stupid! Bright!⁹⁰

In the play, Ariano views his family as an ersatz version of what a real family is supposed to be and he attempts to rectify this by paying a white woman to have his child and by moving to Connecticut once the sale of his business is completed. Much like *Simpson Street*, *Ariano* ends with the breakup of the family. Unlike *Simpson Street*, the ending of Ariano's family leaves one with a sense that it has benefitted all parties

⁹⁰ Richard Irizarry, *Recent Puerto Rican Theater: Five Plays From New York*, ed. John V. Antush (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1991), 195.

involved. For his wife and son, they are exiting a situation rife with verbal and physical abuse. For Ariano, he finally realizes that race does not matter and that it is a superficial criterion by which to judge people. *Ariano* is an example of how internalized racism and self-hatred have the potential to dissolve Latinx families.

Bodega is another play that portrays Latinx family life. Similarly to *Ariano*, the patriarch of the family, Max Toro, is a businessman who owns a bodega. He lives above it with his wife, Elena, and his daughter, Norma. Like many of the characters in the plays, Max and his wife were born in Puerto Rico, but view New York City as their home. The play deals with questions of belonging and how Norma will fit into American society as a *Nuyorican*. This play was produced in the 1985 and 1986 seasons and illustrates a break with plays like *Simpson Street*. Unlike *Simpson Street*, which portrays a family dealing with poverty, *Bodega* shows a more affluent Puerto Rican family that has seemingly embraced the opportunities that America represents. Unlike the previous two plays, the portrayal of family in *Bodega* is much more positive, with the father and mother working together to increase the profitability of the store. While this family is more harmonious than either of the families in *Ariano* and *Simpson Street*, there is still a generational conflict between Norma and her parents as seen in the following exchange:

MAX: Just once I would like to say something without an answer from you.

NORMA: Papi, how am I supposed to rehearse if I can't hear my music?

MAX: Don't tell me you can't hear it, a deaf man can hear it.⁹¹

⁹¹ Federico Fraguada, *Recent Puerto Rican Theater: Five Plays From New York*, ed. John V. Antush (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1991), 52.

Bodega also makes a powerful comment on drugs and substance abuse. Through the character of Rafy, the audience is shown how drug use negatively affects the Latinx community.

MAX: Funny thing is I can still remember the first time you came in here. You were this tall. (*Indicating with hand.*) It sure doesn't seem that long ago... You were quite a kid back then. Good looking, smart, strong, everybody thought you were going to win a gold medal in boxing. Now look at yourself. What a disappointment... you even won a Golden Glove championship back then. You had the world in your hands... You could be rich right now. Instead, you're the undisputed drug champion of the Bronx.⁹²

This dialogue highlights Max's perception of Rafy. Max points out that as a younger man (the author does not specify how young, but indicates that Rafy is close to Norma in age) Rafy was an accomplished athlete who seemingly had everything going for him. Max, ever the businessman, admits this when he states that Rafy "could be rich right now" instead of hawking a Sony Walkman. In Max's eyes, Rafy and his potential were destroyed by drug use. This scene is even more significant when taking into account the conclusion of the play: when Rafy witnesses Max's murder while taking part in a robbery of the bodega. When Max is criticizing Rafy and his drug habit, he is unknowingly criticizing the very thing that will lead to his demise. By including the character of Rafy and by making him the cause of Max's downfall, the playwright is indicating how destructive drug use (and the necessity to survive through crime) in the Latinx community could be and presenting it in a way that is both familiar and unsettling.

⁹² Fraguada, *Recent*, 38-39.

Bodega also comments on the capitalistic ambitions of Latinx businessmen such as Max. Max sees success in business as something tangible and beneficial that he can hand down to his daughter. He often conflates the two and expresses a desire to see Norma working in the bodega as an adult. In the opening of the play, Max is installing an alarm system ostensibly to protect the bodega, but he is also protecting what the bodega means: success for him and his family.⁹³ In one scene between Elena and Max they are discussing the possibilities (or the lack thereof) that their neighborhood holds for them and Nora:

ELENA: Everybody else is moving out of the neighborhood and you're wasting money putting up new alarms.

MAX: It's an investment, not a waste! And, not everybody is moving out, we still have customers. Just wait until those abandoned buildings across the street get renovated, you'll be singing and dancing all over the place.

ELENA: I wish they would renovate them, all of them! And get rid of all the junkies and bums that live around here. Then you and me wouldn't have to worry all the time about Norma. It would be nice to see this neighborhood clean, finally.... But, don't kid yourself, they'll never pick up the garbage around this place.⁹⁴

This passage is symbolic of the greater issues that surround Latinx people and poor people of any race. Both Max and Elena see the decaying neighborhood that they live in as a challenge, not just to their business but also to the well-being of their family. The presence of “junkies and bums” (such as Ruffy) makes both parents worry about the safety of their daughter. Despite their worries, Max remains optimistic even in the face of the abandoned buildings across the street when he insists that they “still have customers.”

⁹³ Fraguada, *Recent*, 28.

⁹⁴ Fraguada, *Recent*, 30.

While Max is implicitly making a distinction between his customers and the “junkies” the events that lead to his shooting death prove that oftentimes these two groups are one and the same.

Family is also present in *Spanish Eyes* and *The Boiler Room*. In the former, the family is more unconventional than in the plays mentioned above as it consists of one man, Esteban, his Anglo wife, Myra, and his grandfather, who is referred to as Abuelo throughout the play. This dynamic makes *Spanish Eyes* unique among the plays in this chapter as it portrays a family unit that is male dominated and one that is grounded in its past in Puerto Rico. This construction of the family also harkens back to the nontraditional structure of families that Latinx immigrants/migrants created in their new country. The play is told as a recollection by Esteban on his experiences as a child and a young man. Throughout the play, the relationship between Esteban and his grandfather is strained by a variety of factors which cause the pair to relocate to New York City. In the city, Esteban meets and marries an American woman who has little in common culturally with Esteban or his grandfather. This marriage leads to most of the conflict in the play, as Esteban is torn between his grandfather (who insists on travelling back to Puerto Rico to die) and his wife (who staunchly refuses the idea of travelling to Puerto Rico.) Abuelo is concerned with Esteban being able to maintain his Puerto Rican culture while married to an American: “But there’s more to life than just marriage and children. There is a culture to consider, a way of life.”⁹⁵ While Abuelo is literally talking about Puerto Rican culture,

⁹⁵ Eduardo Ivan Lopez, *Nuestro New York: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Plays*, ed. John V. Antush (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 197.

this message also functions as a pan-Latinx rallying cry. The goal of preserving one's culture is foundational to the PRTT itself, but also to the Chicano movement which led to an upsurge in Latinx expression in all art forms.

In *The Boiler Room*, family and its potential destruction in the urban environment is at the center of the action. The play was written by Reuben Gonzalez as part of the Playwright's Workshop and was included in John Antush's published collection of Puerto Rican plays. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Gonzalez confesses that the play is semi-autobiographical and that the characters are based in part on his own family members.⁹⁶ Like several of the other plays, *The Boiler Room* features a mother, Olga, with multiple children (in this case a son, Anthony, and a daughter, Olivia) struggling to survive in the city. This play is more similar to *Simpson Street* than the others because it also shows the family being affected by their environment. In the case of *The Boiler Room*, the family is forced to live in the basement of an apartment building. The audience is informed that the father used to work as the super for the building and as part of his employment he was allowed to live with his family in the boiler room. However, this arrangement had detrimental effects on his health (effects which are also evident in his son), eventually resulting in his death. Another similarity between this play and *Simpson Street* is the presence of an interracial marriage. Olivia comes home to the boiler room with a white husband, Doug. Despite their outward appearance, their relationship is marked by deception, as Olivia lies repeatedly about the economic status of her husband: "We don't have to live here, Ma. Doug makes excellent money. We can afford to live

⁹⁶ On Stage, And Off, Bruce Weber, *New York Times*, January 29, 1993, NYPL 671173 b. 10 f. 3.

anywhere we want.”⁹⁷ Their relationship is portrayed as an attempt by Olivia to escape the economic difficulties that have engulfed her family and forced them to reside in basements. Olivia’s deceitfulness at the beginning results in her failure later on, as her husband leaves her and she is forced to move back into the boiler room.

Another factor that threatens the family in *The Boiler Room* is crime. The play opens with Anthony being scolded by his mother for having a box of stolen goods. Given their economic circumstances, it is reasonable that Anthony attempts to supplement their income by any means necessary. This leads him to foregoing school to spend more time on his illicit activities, which causes more friction between him and his family. Eventually, his family’s misgivings are proven to be correct when he is shot and nearly killed. Anthony’s story is an example of how poverty and crime are intertwined in the urban environment and how detrimental they are to the family as a unit.

The Fanlights by Rene Marques is a play that shows how imperialism has destroyed a Latinx family. As one of Puerto Rico’s most prolific playwrights, Marques has had many works produced by the PRTT since their inception in the late 1960’s. *The Oxcart* was the first of many Marques plays that were produced, including such notable entries as *Death Shall Not Enter Palace* and *The Fanlights*. The play portrays three sisters (two of whom are alive) as they struggle to make ends meet financially and cope with the cruel, unforgiving nature of time. Marques creates a world in which the sisters were once part of a happy family, headed by their father, a German baron, and their

⁹⁷ Reuben Gonzalez, *Nuestro New York: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Plays*, ed. John V. Antush (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 273.

mother, a Puerto Rican woman. It is revealed through monologues (such as Emilia's reveries in the sitting room) and in the dialogue between the sisters themselves that they once lived on a large farm and the dingy house that they now occupy was once a well kept mansion. It is through these moments of illuminating the past that Marques (like many of the playwrights in this chapter) includes a criticism of the external forces that plague Latinx families. While reminiscing about the old plantation, Hortensia (the recently deceased sister) accuses Ines of betraying the family by selling the land to "barbarians" aka Americans. Ines then counters this accusation by furiously reprimanding her sister that the Americans were going to take the land no matter what, a reality that Ines reveals in the following monologue:

The present became the beginning of a future filled with disaster. As if Death were the keen blade of a knife that plunged into Time and let loose a whirlwind of unimagined terrors. That was when I began to bear my cross... And all this without selling our lands to the barbarians. So that later the barbarians could simply take them away... "Never sell your lands girls!" Papa Burkhart's dictum. How poorly you carried it out, Hortensia! Lands that lie fallow will always revert to the barbarians!⁹⁸

A great deal of the chaos that proceeds from that moment is directly linked to the loss of their land. By losing their land, the family is forced to move to San Juan and eventually to pawn their jewels and most of their possessions (which the characters also associate with their own memories). Marques uses this circumstance as a metaphor for how the United States is controlling the island. With the invasion of the U.S., the pastoral version of the Puerto Rican family becomes impossible as the necessity of money and the

⁹⁸ Rene Marques, *The Modern Stage in Latin America: Six Plays*, ed. George Woodyard (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc, 1971), 33.

impossibility of maintaining possession of land lead to the breakdown of tradition. This is shown in the conclusion of the play when Ines and Emilia set fire to the house in which they live in order to avoid losing it at auction. Another example of the corrupting influence of the U.S. on the island is the water damage that has resulted in a stain on the sitting room wall whose shape “suggests a map of two continents joined by an isthmus.”⁹⁹ Before they make the decision to burn the house, Ines and Emilia discuss the stain as “One world above: ours. Another world below: theirs.... We must destroy the isthmus.”¹⁰⁰ In this way, the play presents a stark choice that must be made between living in a country dominated by the U.S. or dying.

The theme of urban life is intimately linked with that of family and it often coexists with the theme of family in these plays. Much like *The Fanlights*, these playwrights are showing how external factors negatively influence Latinx groups at large. Throughout the plays, urban life is portrayed in a mostly negative light with poverty, disease, and domestic upheaval attending the characters who dwell in these cities. Plays such as *First Class*, *Simpson Street*, *The Boiler Room*, and *Bomber Jackets* illustrate the hazards that come with life in a city environment. In each of these plays, the city itself poses a challenge to the characters. In *First Class* and *The Boiler Room* the city is associated with poverty. In the case of *First Class*, two homeless brothers, Apache and Speedy, are struggling for survival on a city street. They contend with several challenges that are also found in some of the other plays such as drug use and poverty. *Bomber*

⁹⁹ Marques, *The Modern Stage*, 5.

¹⁰⁰ Marques, *The Modern Stage*, 37.

Jackets also portrays the city as a place where violence can occur. The play centers around a group of men who become increasingly agitated and violent at the perceived invasion of homosexuals into their neighborhood.

Another theme that recurs throughout the plays is that of gender roles. In *Spanish Eyes*, there is a great emphasis placed on the wife's role as a caretaker while the main character works and manages a business. This is similar to the setup of *Ariano*, where Ariano is a successful businessman whose wife wishes to stay at home and focus on raising their child. While the dynamic between Ariano and his wife seems cliché, it is complicated by the presence of Clara, a female friend of Dolores who is quite content to not have a male presence in her life and whose presence is a headache for Ariano. In *The Boiler Room*, the son is thrust into the role of provider and becomes a replacement for his father who served as the super at their apartment building. In this same play, the female characters are portrayed as using their bodies to benefit the family as a whole. Both the sister and the mother resort to dating an elderly grocery store owner whom they believe will assist the family financially. This situation relates closely to the next theme that is presented by these playwrights: capitalism. By commenting on gender roles in their works, the playwrights of the PRTT are also implicitly commenting on the culture of machismo and toxic masculinity that accompany some portrayals of the Latinx community.

THREATS TO THE FAMILY

Capitalism and violence are the final two themes that will be analyzed in this chapter. As seen in *Simpson Street*, *The Fanlights*, *The Boiler Room*, *Bodega*, and *Ariano*

capitalism (and the poverty that it makes possible) is often partnered with violence. Violence takes many different forms in these plays, but its presence indicates the relevance that it has to the artists creating the plays and to the theatre that is producing them. Often, the violence that is portrayed in these plays is of a domestic kind. *Ariano*, *Simpson Street*, and *The Boiler Room* portray violence of this kind. All three of these plays portray families with abusive parents and depict their suffering children. *Ariano* is unique in this respect because the violence that exists in Ariano's home serves as a harsh counterweight to the economic affluence that Ariano has achieved through his laundry business. In the character of Ariano, the audience is being shown a man who has internalized violence and uses it as a way of expressing his frustrations at the color of his son's skin. In *Simpson Street* and *The Boiler Room*, the playwrights are making an overt connection between the poverty that these families exist in and the violent outbursts that are the result of said poverty. *Bomber Jackets*, *The Boiler Room*, and *Bodega* portray violence of an external kind that is associated with crime. In *The Boiler Room* and *Bodega* the external violence that exists in these scripts is also symptomatic of the urban environment that these Latinx families find themselves in. In *Bodega*, Max Toro is shot and killed in an attempted robbery of his store. His death shows the perils that accompany both life in the city and a desire to achieve success in a capitalistic sense. Throughout the play, Max is shown to be concerned with the presence of crime near his bodega. Max seeks to protect the store as it is his primary means of supporting his family. The bodega represents a necessary facet of Max's life, his means of survival, which in the end of the play costs him his life. In *The Boiler Room*, violence is portrayed as a natural,

unchangeable part of the environment. The play is interspersed throughout with references to the violence that exists outside of the family's subterranean home. Olga frequently warns her son not to get mixed up in these situations, to stay safe and attend school. Anthony, however, refuses to listen to her, perhaps out of necessity, or perhaps out of a lingering degradation in their relationship which prevents him from valuing her judgement. Regardless of his reasons, Anthony's illicit activities nearly cost him his life as he is shot by gangsters and taken to a hospital where he struggles to recover.

While it does not contain any of the more dramatic examples of violence, such as the death of Max Toro in *Bodega* or the near-fatal shooting of Anthony in *The Boiler Room*, violence is also present in *First Class*. In one scene, Apache describes a violent confrontation with another pair of homeless people, Grizzly and Midget.

APACHE: He ain't crazy. He's stupid. Imagine, him coming here and telling me he's the new owner of this island. I told him over my dead body, fool. And he swung at me. I ducked under his punch and, pang! I hit him square in his balls....And I started to beat Midget's face too. And every time I hit him I told him, "This is my island. This is my island. This is my island." Grizzly got up and went to stab me in the back, I turned around and put my hand up to block it.¹⁰¹

Another play which includes references to external violence is Rob Santana's *Bomber Jackets*. This play opens with a violent act, or rather the aftermath of a violent act. A detective is investigating a murder that has taken place in a Brooklyn neighborhood. The play, which was produced during the 1996 season, focuses on a group

¹⁰¹ Candido Tirado, *Recent Puerto Rican Theater: Five Plays From New York*, ed. John V. Antush (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1991), 97.

of young (Tommy, Rapallo, and Patrick) men who are concerned with the growing presence of homosexuality in their neighborhood (which also serves as a metaphor for the larger society outside of the city). However, Patrick befriends a trans woman, Erica, who has moved into his apartment building. Eventually, Patrick sides with Erica and abandons the bigotry and hate that ends up consuming Rapallo. Throughout the play, violence and the threat of it are present as the gang patrols the neighborhood wearing the titular jackets, attempting to secure their neighborhood from the perceived encroachment of unwelcome outsiders. To Patrick, whose father is the landlord, this is an extension of the necessary maintenance that goes along with running a building: “I had a responsibility, y’know? We ALL did. Keep the area clean. Clean sidewalks. No graffiti. No deadbeats. We were like a team.”¹⁰² This preoccupation with cleanliness morphs into an obsession with purity and maintaining the neighborhood in its existing fashion, which then motivates the gang to use threats of violence to “protect” their neighborhood.

Another play that features themes of violence and capitalism is *I Am A Winner* by Fred Valle. This comedy (which was produced during the same season as *Spanish Eyes* and was featured in an anthology of Puerto Rican plays) was promoted by the PRTT as “The hilarious misadventures of a Puerto Rican married to a shrew, and the strange things that happen when she discovers that he has won the 15 million dollar lottery.”¹⁰³ Jose Rey starred as Arturo, the main character who ends up winning the lottery and uncovering his wife Carmela’s plot to take his fortune (and his life). As the promotional material

¹⁰² *Bomber Jackets*, Rob Santana, 2007, page 5.

¹⁰³ Program for *I Am A Winner*, 1990, NYPL 671174 b. 10 f. 8.

suggests, the show is a light hearted comedy, but it still has a great deal to say about violence and capitalism. The entire plot of the play (much like *Spanish Eyes*) revolves around a Puerto Rican man who achieves the American Dream of abundant wealth. For Arturo, winning the lottery represents an escape from the tiny apartment that he shares with Carmela and his miserable day to day experience as a butcher. In the first act, Carmela states: “I can’t stand having you around the house all day. It’s worse than a nightmare.”¹⁰⁴ This sort of derogatory remark is repeated throughout the play and serves as a prelude to the moment when Carmela and her lover Tony attempt to steal Arturo’s fortune by having him institutionalized and/or murdered. Despite its lightheartedness and farcical nature, the play makes a clear connection between success in a capitalist sense and motives for murder. Before Arturo won the lottery, Carmela was content with cheating on him. After winning, Carmela’s dislike of Arturo turned homicidal.

PRODUCTIONS

Aside from the thematic content of the plays, the productions themselves are also emblematic of the PRTT’s attempts to articulate a pan-Latinx identity. While all of the playwrights are of Puerto Rican descent, the plays were often perceived by Latinx reviewers as speaking to the Latinx community as a whole. A pan-Latinx focus is also evident in the casting choices of the PRTT, as actors of various different nationalities were cast in these shows. A similar claim can be made about the directing. During this period Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Chicanos, and others all had opportunities to direct shows

¹⁰⁴ Fred Valle, *Nuestro New York: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Plays*, ed. John V. Antush (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 311.

for the PRTT. Another aspect of the PRTT's operations was its continued emphasis on travel. Aside from performing in the city, the PRTT also capitalized on opportunities to perform in international theatre festivals in a wide array of Latinx countries.

THE MAN AND THE FLY by Jose Ruibal, was invited to perform in Madrid by the Ministry of Culture of Spain; SIMPSON STREET by Eduardo Gallardo, was invited to participate in theatre festivals in Spain, Puerto Rico, Colombia, and Mexico. In January 1988, the Institute of Culture of Puerto Rico invited us to present Federic Fraguada's BODEGA as part of their 24th International Theatre Festival. BODEGA was performed five times at the prestigious Centro de Bellas Artes in San Juan, and then accepted invitations to perform at the University of Puerto Rico and at Catholic University in Ponce.¹⁰⁵

Aside from its own goal of making Latinx theatre more accessible in the United States, the PRTT's work was also appreciated by Latinx audiences on three different continents. The PRTT also continued its tradition of producing plays in both English and Spanish.

Every play featured in this chapter was produced bilingually. This focus on bilingual productions put the PRTT in a unique position as a theatre company. Unlike the Broadway houses, the PRTT could welcome audience members who could not speak English or who had limited English language skills. In terms of the casting however, this arrangement usually resulted in two different actors being cast as the leads, one in English and one in Spanish.¹⁰⁶ The commitment to bilinguality also forced the company to obtain the services of translators, some of whom were affiliated with local universities

¹⁰⁵ PUERTO RICAN TRAVELING THEATRE COMPANY, INC.: HISTORY AND PURPOSE, October 9, 1990, NYPL 671175 b. 10 f. 13.

¹⁰⁶ Program for *Ariano*, 1990, NYPL 671174 b. 10 f. 6.

and some of whom were performers in the shows themselves.¹⁰⁷ Despite the added difficulties that came with producing plays in two different languages, the PRTT maintained this stance as a means of reaching the broadest Latinx audience possible.

The production of *The Fanlights* illustrates cross Latinx cooperation between two theatre companies. This production, which opened in May 1980 featured the talents of Miriam Colon as Ines, Carmen Zapata as Emilia, and Elia Enid Cadilla as Hortensia. Both Miriam Colon and Carmen Zapata had distinguished careers as actresses and each of them was the head of a Latinx theatre company. The PRTT's production of the show (performed in their newly acquired permanent space) is particularly significant due to the fact that it is a partnership, or a co-production, with the Bilingual Foundation of the Arts (BFA). The Bilingual Foundation of the Arts was founded in 1973 in order to foment the "establishment of an American Hispanic professional theatre playing in English and in Spanish."¹⁰⁸ Like the PRTT, the BFA had a mainstage season (four productions a year) and would also tour the state of California, producing a mix of contemporary and classic plays.¹⁰⁹ The production features a diverse Latinx cast (Colon and Cadilla are both Puerto Ricans, Zapata is a Chicana) and it directly critiques imperialist policies of the United States that have impacted people of every Latinx nation since the nineteenth century.

Ariano highlights the importance of bilinguality in the PRTT. *Ariano* was produced by the PRTT in two different seasons, premiering in 1988 and being revived in 1990. Both productions were directed by Vicente Castro, an accomplished director who

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Fanlights* Program, 1980, NYPL 671165 b. 2 f. 1.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

had been named Best Director in 1985 by the Association of Theatrical Critics of Puerto Rico, received an MFA in Directing from Michigan State University, and had been directing professionally since 1971.¹¹⁰ The revival also featured several of the same cast members including Graciela Lecube, “an accomplished Argentinian actress” who also performed translating services for the PRTT, in the role of Dona Aida, Candice Brecker, a veteran of the professional stage who portrayed Crystal in both productions, and Jimmy Borbon, a child actor who played Serafin in *Ariano* and would later perform in *Spanish Eyes*.¹¹¹ Both the revival production of *Ariano* and the original also featured two different actors in the title role. In Spanish, the role was performed by Jose Rey, who would later perform in *I Am A Winner* with the PRTT.¹¹² In English, the role was played by Machiste, described in the program as having “many t.v. credits.”¹¹³ Neither of these two actors played the part in the original production, but starred in the revival. The 1990 production also featured Cuban-born Angel Salazar as Soldier. Salazar was a student of the Training Unit prior to his casting in *Ariano* and had performed in the film *Scarface* in the previous decade.¹¹⁴

The PRTT’s production of *Bodega* demonstrated that their shows were capable of impacting diverse audiences. While there is not a great deal of archival material on the production, there are some extant reviews. William Raidy wrote in 1986 that the play

¹¹⁰ Program for *Ariano*, 1990, NYPL 671174 b. 10 f. 6.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

“has something to say to everyone.”¹¹⁵ This includes then mayor of New York City Ed Koch, who saw the play and in a conversation with Miriam Colon afterwards stated that “when I was fourteen years old, I worked in a grocery store. It wasn’t really called a ‘bodega’... but it was a bodega.”¹¹⁶ Later in the article, Raidy also gives a bit of background information on the play’s creation, mentioning that the playwright Federico Fraguada was a member of the Playwright’s Workshop and that he developed this play partially based on his own upbringing in the Bronx.¹¹⁷ This review (and in particular the mayor’s response to the show) is an example of the universality that accompanied many of the PRTT’s productions. The mayor’s reaction to the show serves as a testament to the PRTT’s ability to facilitate understanding and tolerance between different ethnic/racial groups. When an individual with as much power and privilege as the mayor of New York City can watch a show about a Puerto Rican family running a grocery store and see something of their own experience, something that they can relate to, clearly some form of communication is occurring between the playwright, the actors, and every audience member.

Spanish Eyes reveals the importance of autobiographical inspiration. The play was written by Eduardo Ivan Lopez as part of the Playwright’s Workshop and was published as part of an anthology of Puerto Rican works in the early 1990s. In an interview with *The New York Times*, Lopez reveals a great deal about his own background and the autobiographical elements that make it into the play. Like Esteban,

¹¹⁵ Puerto Rican Troupe Has Something to Say in Both English and Spanish, William A. Raidy, *The Star Ledger*, February 2, 1986, NYPL 671173 b.10 f. 1.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Lopez moved to the United States at a young age and had a close relationship with his grandfather who would tell him stories.¹¹⁸ Lopez also earned a living as a self-taught contractor and joined the military after high school.¹¹⁹ According to the interview, Lopez grew tired of the life that he created and went into the theatre.¹²⁰ In addition to *Spanish Eyes*, Lopez' play *Lady With A View* was produced by the PRTT during the 1986 season.

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The PRTT's production of *Bomber Jackets* highlights some of the misinterpretations that can accompany producing theatre perceived by others as Latinx. While the archival evidence is not as plentiful as some of the other plays, there are some insightful reviews of the production. D.J.R. Bruckner had high praise for the show writing that "the play is an unusually thoughtful investigation of both the dark and the light side of the human imagination and the fearful results it can produce."¹²² Bruckner also cites the direction of Alba Oms and the performances of the cast throughout as strengths of the PRTT's production. A review in *The New Yorker* was a bit more measured stating that the "play makes a powerful point about the visceral nature of stereotypes and the wrench it takes to get beyond them."¹²³ This reviewer also believed (incorrectly) that the play was written in Spanish and then translated into English even

¹¹⁸ Hispanic Playwright Follows 'the Dream', Alvin Klein, *The New York Times*, June 3, 1990. NYPL 671173 b. 10 f. 3

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² Gang Thriller In Bay Ridge With a Sassy Cross Dresser, D.J.R. Bruckner, *The New York Times*, April 3, 1996.

¹²³ Goings On About Town: The Theatre, author unknown, *The New Yorker*, April 1, 1996.

though it (like most of the plays produced by the PRTT) was written in English and translated into Spanish.¹²⁴

REVIEWS

Reviews of the production undertaken by the PRTT are revealing of how the plays were perceived by audiences. In analyzing the reviews, a mix of perspectives becomes readily apparent. In the eyes of some reviewers, these productions were capable of delivering a message that could resonate with all Latinx people and beyond. That a Puerto Rican theatre company could produce work that was embraced as universal or pan-Latinx is a testament to the company's ability to transcend racial and cultural barriers and to connect with a diverse array of audiences.

In the reviews of Alberto Minero, a pan-Latinx appreciation of the plays is evident. When reviewing *The Boiler Room*, Minero praised the strength of Gonzalez' writing claiming that authors with his "quality, sensitivity, and depth" were going to secure a bright future for Latinx drama in the coming century.¹²⁵ Minero goes on to state that this piece in particular serves as an "intimate portrait of the vicissitudes of life for all Hispanic women in this country."¹²⁶ By making a claim about the universality of Olga's situation to all Latinas and by claiming that Gonzalez represents the future of Latinx

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ Un Triple Triunfo del Teatro Puertorriqueño, Alberto Minero, *El Diario*, January 27, 1993, NYPL 671173 b. 10 f. 3, author's translation, "con autores de la calidad, sensibilidad, y profundidad de Reuben Gonzalez, está más que asegurado."

¹²⁶ *Ibid.* "Su íntimo retrato de la vida de una mujer puertorriqueña en nuestra ciudad, tiene la grandeza suficiente como para convertirse en un auténtico documento de las vicisitudes de toda la comunidad latina en este país."

drama, Minero is stating that the work speaks to a universal truth that relates to *all* members of the Latina community.

Minero echoes these claims in his 1990 review of *Spanish Eyes* as well. In that review, Minero states that the play touches on themes (such as racism, language barriers, and the concept of nationality) that resonate with the majority of Latinx people in the United States.¹²⁷ Minero is highlighting these themes as a way of showing the common cultural struggles that afflict many Latinx people, regardless of nationality. Minero also pays the playwright a high compliment by comparing this work's style to the cerebral plays of Arthur Miller.¹²⁸ Minero also has high praise for the performances of the three leads (Eduardo Soto as Abuelo, Eddie Andino as the adult Esteban, and Alexandra Reichler as Myra).¹²⁹

Spanish Eyes was also reviewed by Don Nelsen of the *Daily News* who perceived different themes in the play than Minero. Nelsen wrote that the playwright has an “eye for the telling metaphor” and that the device of the triangle (one character in the middle with the other two on opposing sides) was executed “with admirable craft.”¹³⁰ While Minero pointed out themes that are relevant to the Latinx community, Nelsen honed in on the portrayal of The American Dream, which they define as “successfully negotiating the upwardly mobile trip from ghetto to suburbs as quickly as possible.”¹³¹ Nelsen also

¹²⁷ La Profunda Mirada de los “Ojos Hispanos”, Alberto Minero, *El Diario*, May 24, 1990, NYPL 671173 b. 10 f. 3.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ ‘Eyes Fixes Gaze on Culture Clash’, Don Nelsen, *Daily News*, May 29, 1990, NYPL 671173 b. 10 f. 3.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

focuses on the place of promises and what importance should be placed on honoring them even when the honoring may have negative consequences for all involved. Nelsen concludes the review by calling the play “one of the PRTT’s better offerings.”¹³² Nelsen and Mireno’s reviews in conjunction show that the PRTT was capable of reaching audiences in both languages and creating provocative pieces regardless of the audience member’s affiliation (or lack thereof) with the Latinx community.

The reviews of both *The Boiler Room* and *Spanish Eyes* illustrate that these plays mean certain things to the Latinx community (a model of how all Latina women should act, the conflict between embracing U.S. culture and maintaining Latinx culture, and the struggle to avoid/survive in poverty) and certain things to the Anglo community (Nelsen and the implicit connection between the plot of *Spanish Eyes* and the classic immigrant pursuit of the American Dream and Oliver’s preoccupation with the size of the PRTT stage). Despite the differing interpretations of these two communities, the plays were received quite positively.

In the reviews of *Ariano*, however, a different perspective is taken. In the initial reviews, the theme of racial prejudice takes center stage. In Robert Fleming’s review of the original production, the play is talked about as an overtly controversial piece from Richard Irizarry. The review contains snippets of interviews with both Irizarry and Rafael Baez (who played Ariano in the English shows during the 1988 production) who both defend the play’s content. Irizarry states plainly that “A lot of Latinos want to pass for white. Many of them have come down hard on me for using these themes, saying I’m

¹³² *Ibid.*

exaggerating.”¹³³ In the same article, Baez expressed concern about how non-Latinx people (especially critics) were perceiving the play “I’ve been concerned with the people reviewing the play... Whites do not understand what is being said there. One reviewer said that we were denying our heritage.”¹³⁴ Unlike Minero’s reviews above, *Ariano* was not proclaimed by the Latinx community as being emblematic of the community as a whole. Rather, the play was received harshly by both Latinx people who disagreed with Irizarry’s portrayal of racial issues and by Whites who did not believe the content of the play to be an accurate depiction of Latinx people.

For the reviews above, the plays of the PRTT were emblematic of the Latinx experience. Minero in particular is very clear about his belief in the universality of these plays and their characters in his reviews. Minero makes a conscious effort to elaborate upon the relevance of *The Boiler Room* and *Spanish Eyes* to the Latinx community not merely due to their content, but also due to the importance of cultivating Latinx artists in the theatre. In the case of *Ariano* however, an author’s attempt to put their culture onstage was met with a strong backlash from both Latinx people who accused Irizarry of exaggerating the issue of race and from White reviewers who did not grasp the nuances of race in the Latinx community. Some reviewers, like Don Nelsen, were able to take different meanings from these shows and highlighted different themes in their reviews. These reviews prove that the productions of the PRTT could be many things to many

¹³³ Latin Playwright Eyes the Color of Success, Robert Fleming, *Daily News*, February 11, 1988, NYPL 671173 b. 10 f. 1.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

people, but that they were also capable of being considered universal pieces, even to non-Latinx reviewers.

CONCLUSION

Building on the foundation of Latinx activism that prevailed throughout the 1960's and 1970's, the PRTT of the 1980's and 1990's continued to produce plays that were meant for audiences (and actors) of all nationalities and races. During these two decades, the PRTT produced a number of shows that portrayed the family as a significant unit of Latinx identity and the many factors that threatened it. Some of these factors were internal, like the racism/colorism described in *Ariano*, while others were external, such as the encroachment of the United States in *The Fanlights*. In each of these shows, Latinx families are pitted against forces that threaten to destroy them. This theme of the family calls back to the earlier days of Puerto Rican and Latinx migration when family units were a key enabler of the chain migration process by which extended families would migrate to the United States. The family in that time (and in some of the plays above) served as a bastion of culture, a unit that stressed the importance of maintaining links to the homeland and resisting complete assimilation.

Another way that the PRTT expressed a pan-Latinx identity during this time was in its casting choices. As seen above, the PRTT made no distinctions between nationalities when it came time to cast their shows. This diversity of casting would have been a stark contrast to the mostly caucasian casting choices that were then being made on Broadway and in other mainstream theatres. This diversity also extended to the other members of the production, such as the directors, costume designers, and others. In

making these choices, the PRTT was staying true to its goals and making their theatre accessible to all Latinx people whether they were sitting in its house or performing on its stage.

EPILOGUE

The story of the PRTT is one of evolution. That evolution has carried on from the middle decades of the 20th century to the present day. For most of its existence, the PRTT was its own entity, producing plays, musicals, and farces and bringing them to neighborhoods in every borough of New York City, to other countries, and even to other continents. From its beginnings in the 1960s, the PRTT grew into a more bureaucratic organization with a well-defined structure for producing plays over the summers, training young people of all ethnicities in the Training Unit, and launching the careers of Latinx playwrights like Candido Tirado, Eduardo Gallardo, Rob Santana, and numerous others through the Playwrights Workshop. The PRTT achieved this through partnerships with many different funders; corporate giants like Chemical Bank and Boeing, as well as the municipal and state governments of New York were among those who said *presente* during this period.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the PRTT was a proponent for a pan-Latinx identity. In the thematic content of the plays that came out of the Playwright's Workshop, the PRTT highlighted the importance of the family as an organizing unit of Latinx society. Many of the playwrights involved also introduced the various ways in which the Latinx family came under assault in the modern United States. Whether it be through drugs, systemic poverty, imperialist domination, or linguistic and cultural differences, each of

the families that these playwrights created were being threatened by something. In several of the plays, such as *Spanish Eyes* and *First Class*, these families were non-traditional, hearkening back to the period of chain migration during the early twentieth century.

The PRTT's emphasis on a pan-Latinx identity was also expressed in the productions themselves. For many of the plays, the PRTT cast actors from a wide range of Latinx backgrounds. Mexican-Americans, Cubans, Argentinians, and others found roles in the productions of the PRTT during this period. One could also find an equal amount of diversity in the directors that the PRTT hired as well. It is fitting that this period began with perhaps the single greatest example of pan-Latinx theatre: the 1980 production of Marques' *The Fanlights*. By collaborating with a theatre company based in a different city and by casting Zapata as one of the leads, the PRTT showed that it valued the maintenance of Latinx culture even if it was not strictly Puerto Rican. Throughout the period, the PRTT maintained its commitment to producing plays bilingually and for low admission prices (the summer performances which toured the city were always free of charge). Even though this often necessitated the casting of two different actors to play the leads in their productions, the PRTT staunchly continued to perform in both Spanish and English in order to make their plays as accessible as possible and to ensure that theatre in New York City remained attainable to Latinx people regardless of their language.

This pan-Latinx focus was also evident from reviews in *El Diario*. In that publication, Alberto Minero repeatedly made claims about the universality of PRTT productions to the Latinx community as a whole. Minero's reviews also highlighted the

training activities of the PRTT and the importance that training a new generation of Latinx artists would have for all Latinx people in the United States. Aside from *El Diario*, the productions also garnered praise from critics who saw universality of a different kind in these shows. Don Nelsen, for example, pointed out the presence of the American Dream and the burden of keeping promises as two universal themes from the PRTT's production of *Spanish Eyes*.

Another important (though woefully understudied) aspect of the PRTT's pan-Latinx focus is their extensive travel activities. While the summer tours in New York City's boroughs have been well documented by scholars like De La Roche, the PRTT also engaged in a remarkable amount of overseas travel. Destinations visited by the PRTT include Spain, Colombia, Mexico, and, of course, Puerto Rico. This aspect of the PRTT is in my opinion the most intriguing, not only because of its obvious links to my claim that the PRTT advocated for a pan-Latinx identity, but also for the mystery surrounding it. Other than passing references (such as the memo in chapter three) I have yet to find a substantial source that deals with the overseas travelling activities of the PRTT. I continue to hope that scholars will be able to fill this gap in my lifetime.

Although my research concludes in the 1990s, the company has continued its existence well into the 21st century. In 2014, the PRTT merged with the Pregones Theatre, another Puerto Rican theatre company operating primarily in the Bronx.¹³⁵ Pregones has a similar story to the PRTT. Both began as small theatrical organizations with a focus on Puerto Rican theatre. Both eventually acquired permanent spaces in

¹³⁵ <https://pregonesprtt.org/about#!/mission-history>

which to perform. Like the PRTT, Pregones also began training playwrights with the creation of the Asuncion Playwrights Project (which focuses on plays pertaining about the LGBTQ+ experience) in 2003.¹³⁶

Today, these two companies share a website and mutually produce Latinx shows. Reading their mission statement, I still see the legacy of Miriam Colon and the original goals of the PRTT. “Our mission is to champion a Puerto Rican/Latinx cultural legacy of universal value through creation and performance of original plays and musicals, exchange and partnership with other artists of merit, and engagement of diverse audiences.”¹³⁷ It is inspiring to see that although the PRTT has changed drastically in its organization, it is still committed to making theatre matter to a diverse array of people.

The dual company does a good job of representing both elements of its identity on the site. If you desire a succinct history of the PRTT (like I did when first investigating this topic), the home page for Pregones/PRTT is an ideal place to start. I had never (unfortunately) heard of the play *Bomber Jackets* until I first began my research into the PRTT by perusing this site. From there, it was a natural progression to tracking down and reading other plays and learning more about these productions. I owe a great deal of this project to the people in charge of that website. As I write this epilogue, all of the upcoming events that were to take place this spring have been postponed in an unprecedented shutdown of theatrical events due to the coronavirus. Visiting the site, however, I cannot help but admire the optimism with which this company continues to

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

promote upcoming events (at this point, I find the word “postponed” a much more optimistic alternative to the hideous word “cancelled.”)

Given its/their past, the Pregones/PRTT will likely recover from this pandemic, but for now, their houses remain empty and their stages vacant. Regardless of the changes to come, when it’s time to adapt and evolve, the PRTT (like the broader Latinx community in the United States and around the world) has always excelled at that. The ability to find strength and inspiration even in the most challenging of circumstances is part of what makes the role of the theatre (and the artist in general) so important in the 21st century, when things seem so uncertain, when everyday brings a new host of anxieties and fears, and when society is sailing into uncharted waters. For the first (and hopefully last) time in millennia, virtually all theatrical production on this planet has ground to a halt. Although it remains to be seen how long before lights will go down in a theatre full of people again, it is a certainty that the PRTT (in its newest form) will be there on opening night with an enthusiastic crowd, fulfilling the goals that Miriam Colon articulated so many years ago. *Hasta pronto.*

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