

Article

CADAVERS ENCOUNTERED: IDENTIFICATION AND COMMUNITY IN US LATINO/A CULTURAL PRODUCTION

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Abstract

*This study discusses the literary and theatrical portrayal of corpses in Cuban-American Roberto G. Fernández's *Raining Backwards*, Puerto Rican Esmeralda Santiago's *When I Was Puerto Rican*, and Miguel Piñero's *Short Eyes*. In dialogue with various critics of communitarian and nationalistic thinking (Nancy, Balibar, Joseph, and Anderson), the author reflects upon the problematics of community, its sense of project and destiny, its vehement impulse toward domesticating difference, and its program for hegemonizing subalternity. From this perspective, the cadaver is discussed as an ontological void in Latino/a communitarian articulation and as a recurrent topos in this group's cultural production. This study proposes that the dead body needs to be considered critically in order to disrupt meta-narratives of hybridization that guide Latino communitarian thinking and the production-consumption dynamics within the US multicultural nation. "Cadavers encountered" advances a model for critically un-reading more commercial/hegemonic Latino products and for underscoring counter-pedagogic thinking in less commercial/alternative ones. In the process it suggests a variety of cultural commodities that could be studied in fashions similar to the work of Fernández, Santiago, and Piñero.*

Keywords

Cuban-Americans; Cuban-American literature; Puerto Rican literature; Puerto Ricans in the US; Hispanic-Americans; Latino cultural studies; popular culture – United States; community; cadavers



This essay intends to reflect upon the manner in which the Latino community is portrayed and constructed in various Latino cultural products. At one level I critique a narrative of fluid cultural hybridization that recurs in a plethora of Latino representations. This unrelenting narrative suggests that Latinos have deftly integrated a cornucopia of cultural influences and have concurrently conveyed, into mainstream US culture, their own practices and values – culinary, musical, linguistic, religious, etc. I recognize that this narrative of hybridization assists a strategic penetration into hegemonic circuits of culture and power. But it may also reproduce dominant values and ideas that sanction the enduring oppression and marginalization of Latinos and the style of administering diversity within a purportedly inclusive and non-hierarchical multicultural US nation. As a counterpoint to this unwavering image of Latino induction into mainstream culture (what I would call *hegemonization*), I will focus upon the image of the cadaver as a symbol that disrupts the paradigmatic notion of hybridization in three celebrated texts by Latino authors: *When I Was Puerto Rican* (1998) by Esmeralda Santiago, *Raining Backwards* (1997) by Roberto G. Fernández, and *Short Eyes* ([1974] 2000) by Miguel Piñero. The dead body will be discussed as an image of symbolic and esthetic depth, which locates an indirect appraisal of a generalized celebration of cultural admixture, and that coincidentally emerges with a meta-narrative of Latino admittance into mainstream culture.

Rethinking Latino hybridity

The paradigm of hybridization provides, for the Latino community, an explication of the long-standing interaction with the US multi-cultural nation. It also fosters a sense of historical depth and destiny, and a shared feeling of cultural and political advancement. The image of the Latino collective is grounded in a dynamic construction of a discourse on community, from a subaltern perspective, erected in vigorous interaction with a hegemonic ideal of the “imagined political community” of the Nation (Anderson, 1991, 6).¹ A broad consideration of the value and meaning of communitarian discourse suggests that community bases political discourse and supports bonds of solidarity while it mediates recognition by the State. It thus becomes a site of power and, from a subaltern perspective, it allows for forceful negotiations with hegemonic culture. To be clear, the narrative of Latino cultural hybridization is the discursive manifestation of this community’s political ideal and, as such, it becomes the vehicle to advance a collective political program and support solidarity among Latinos.

As Etienne Balibar contends, community reaches the limit of progressive political and symbolic action in its intransigent sense of “project and destiny” (Balibar, 1991, 86), and in the manner in which it supports “a combination of

1 Benedict Anderson has famously argued that the Nation imagines “a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time” as each member “has complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity” (1991, 26).

2 The validity of this discourse has been cogently brought to task by Jean Luc Nancy in *The Inoperative Community*, Giorgio Agamben (1993) in *The Coming Community*, and Julia Kristeva in *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991) and *Nations without Nationalisms* (Kristeva, 1993), among others, who shed light upon its problematic philosophical underpinnings, questionable ethical substance, and grave potential for reproducing oppression.

3 Miranda Joseph, in *Against the Romance of Community*, problematizes the ethnological reasoning that supports collective identities and exposes the link between capitalism, modernity, and a hegemonic notion of community. She homes in on practices of consumption and production that reify capitalism's logic and become the dominant vehicle for asserting, reproducing, and renegotiating communal identities.

practices, discourses and representations in a network of affective stereotypes which enables us to give an account of the formation of a racist community (or a community of racists ...) and also of the way in which ... individuals and collectivities that are prey to racism (its 'objects') find themselves constrained to see themselves as a community" (1991, 18).² Considering these cautionary words, I offer a two-pronged critique of the Latino communitarian discourse and its narrative of hybridization. First, I suggest that this discourse, however necessary and progressive it may be in its interaction with hegemonic spheres of power and culture, should be carefully studied, even made difficult, as it may become itself a vehicle for repression of difference *within* the collective. Hybridization becomes a facile stand-in for broad and diverse historical experiences, for variegated racial, social, gender, and linguistic positions, and for heterogeneous political ideologies and projects. Second, the narrative of hybridization, which supports the Latino communitarian ideal, works in synchrony with the multi-cultural ethos of dominant national discourse (e.g., the "melting pot") and its desire to order the Nation's racial and ethnic diversity. As the State labors to organize the ethno-racial diversity of the Nation into stable ethnic or racial communities (e.g., "Hispanic," "African American," "Native American," "Asian American," "White"), the Latino collective echoes this administrative (and political) program by manifesting itself as an ethnological collective subject, thereby becoming the vehicle of a hegemonic ideology – and indirectly contributing to its own oppression.³

In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno proposes that "totality is to be opposed by convicting it of nonidentity with itself – of the nonidentity it denies, according to its own concept" (Adorno, 2000, 147). I argue that hybridity – the end product of the process of synthesizing difference – may become a new totalizing paradigm mediating the production of a Latino collective identity, and should be problematized to obstruct its homogenizing thrust and to bring to light its inability to explicate the broad diversity it ostensibly epitomizes. To heed Adorno's warning, this totality must be convicted of nonidentity with itself because it denies the possibility of nonidentity, "according to its own concept." With this in mind, I argue that the *topos* of the cadaver interrupts the fluid narrative of hybridization and locates what Alberto Moreiras phrases as "a sort of residual subject sovereignty" (2001, 64).⁴ This "sort of residual subject sovereignty" is what is left out of a purportedly inclusive and progressive identitarian cultural discourse and what I identify as a site of *ontological negativity* – where meaning loses authority. Although Moreiras is more concerned with a Latin American discourse on *mestizaje* and *transculturación* – as advanced by Fernando Ortiz and Ángel Rama, and broadly defended by latinamericanists, his critical inquiry challenges the creation of a new hybrid collective identity and a broader program of hybridization, which is, *mutatis mutandi*, in synchrony with my intention.

Latino hybridity and intellectual production

Devoid of any intention of demonizing a discourse on hybridity or, even less, those who engage it, I argue that this view has broadly influenced cultural, artistic, and even critical endeavors. As a brief sampling of the impact it has had on critical undertakings, I would like to harvest some revealing quotes from three academic texts that have had notable circulation: William Luis's (1999) *Dance Between Two Cultures*, Gustavo Pérez Firmat's (1994) *Life on the Hyphen*, and Juan González's (2000) *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America* (2000). To quote from Luis' excellent reading of Spanish-Caribbean diasporic literature: "Bolívar's discourse of the Gran Colombia ... has become a reality... [it] has been recontextualized not in Latin America ... but in the United States... . [Latinos] combine their cultures with those of African Americans, Native Americans, and, most important, Anglo-Americans to produce a new concept of Latino, race, and identity" (1999, 290). The book's last paragraph invents a shared long-standing past and, simultaneously, promotes an ethics of cultural and political combination and identification. This joyful and progressive admixture, however, endorses a new totality grounded on a narrative of cultural combination. At another level, it must be noted that an implicit purpose of his study is to construct a hierarchy of literary works, authors, and tastes (a new minor canon), which, perhaps unconsciously, privileges nationalistic themes, masculine authors, patriarchal values, and more traditional tastes and ideologies. Thus, the overt celebratory and inclusive gesture conceals a less-than-democratic intentionality that reproduces the values of this emerging community – which is not all-inclusive Latino, but exclusively Hispanic-Caribbean.

Pérez-Firmat's sagacious analysis of Cuban-American cultural production also poses a narrative of integration: "the Cuban-American way is not inconsistent with the American way. A well-groomed mango (like a well-crowned mambo) can be just as American as apple pie. The Desi [Arnaz] Chain may move to the beat of the conga, but with each step it advances deeper into the American heartland" (1994, 20). Pérez-Firmat's emphasis on exchange and cross-contamination plays up auditory and culinary consumption, a curious, though rather ubiquitous analogy of mixing that envisions a teleology of convergence in sameness. Concomitantly, the critic points at the erotics of consuming Latino identity and insinuates a hierarchy whereby this subaltern culture willingly offers itself up for the pleasures of hegemonic, "American" society. Although this notable treatise has become a touchstone in discussions on *latinidad*, it is vital to observe that *Life on the Hyphen* is concerned with a fragment of the Cuban-American community: it favors the culture of pre-Castro immigrants (such as Desi-Arnaz) and of the first wave of exiles, but purges *Marielitos* of the 1980s (where his book and his model for cultural analysis comes to an end), and overlooks the crucial relationships between Cubans and

She cautions that "fetishizing community only makes us blind to the ways we might intervene in the enactment of domination and exploitation" (2002, ix). The crux of this precarious construct, nonetheless, is linked with the rise of capitalism and modernity: "capitalism and, more generally, modernity depend on and generate the discourse of community to legitimate social hierarchies... . [Identity] is a false name in that communal participants are not identical and many of those to whom an identity is attributed do not participate in communal activities [C]ommunal subjectivity is constituted not by identity but rather through practices of production and consumption" (Joseph, 2002, viii).

4 Our critical project is in line with a broader consideration of cultural miscegenation as hegemonic discourse, and of symbolic laboring within a subaltern-hegemonic dyad that purports to explain away the inevitable tensions

within the multi-cultural nation. In considering the strategic pause of a discourse on hybridity, our work dialogues with Gareth Williams's recent *The Other Side of the Popular* in which he makes difficult "transculturation" as a model for renegotiating difference within Latinamericanism: "transculturation is not just another name for the anthropological phenomenon of cultural miscegenation between dominant and dominated cultures. It assumes a fundamental legitimating function inside the nation-state, as well as in the relation between the state and the popular/elite cultural spheres" (Williams, 2002, 24).

other Latino and Latin American communities in the United States. Additionally, his fluid narrative plays down political, class, gender, and race tensions within the Cuban collective. The celebration of a new hybrid culture, a Cuban-American identity, facilitates a symbolic ordering that expunges differences, creates an internal social hierarchy, and indirectly avows nationalistic thinking.

From a different ideological position, Juan González's *Harvest of Empire* criticizes US designs of hemispheric domination and rampant oppression of Latinos. His user-friendly review of the thorny history of US Latinos affirms:

No matter what the leaders of this nation may claim about its immutable Anglo-Saxon character, fresh waves of immigrants arrive each year, flinging themselves and their customs into the mix, recombining and redefining, ever so lightly, the locus of shared memories that make up the definition of America. This process of shared memories and change, of cross-fertilization and amalgamation is more likely to speed up in the twenty-first century (2000, 269).

This Nuyorican journalist and notable member of The Young Lords Party envisions a forceful and tense process of cultural "amalgamation," and thus reinforces the long-term goal of hybridization. His discourse of totality in difference guides a program of admitting Latinos into the mainstream – hegemonizing *latinidad* – concomitant with a broad demographic transformation. As the book unequivocally asserts: "Latinos, who now compose one of every ten Americans, will increase to one of every four by the year 2050, and could even approach one-half of the population by 2100" (270). In order to imagine a wholesome collectivity, based on their shared history of oppression and violence at US hands, González disregards the difficult tensions between diverse Latino groupings based on differences in national origins, social class, religion, race, gender, and sexual orientation. He dissolves internal differences to support a long-term goal of convergence in one hybrid ethnic community, where ancestral nationality and other seminal markers of identity are down-played to afford a communal ethnic identity. Once more, the narrative of hybridization affords a repressive conceptualization of identity, historical project, and destiny, which subordinate social and political positions.

I do not pretend to simplify the complexity of these authors' intellectual work to one purpose or teleological argument, reducing it to a direct sanctioning of assimilationist or integrationist tendencies. I do, however, point to an underlying theme that informs a particular line of thought which recurs in a variety of scholarly and intellectual texts. The thrust of the arguments deployed by Luis and González are, in essence, radical and progressive. They adamantly insist on renegotiating the landscape of power and culture in

mainstream US society, and advocate granting hegemonic status to Latinos. Similarly, Pérez Firmat, from a more conciliatory political position, attempts to cast doubt on an Anglo-centric vision of the multi-cultural nation.⁵ Ideological leanings aside, I contend that asserting hybridity as a central paradigm could support, even indirectly and grudgingly, a dominant intention of organizing ethno-racial diversity within the US multi-cultural Nation and of sensibly encapsulating communities under the rubric of ethnicity.⁶

Predictably, the wide-ranging notion of *latinidad* as a hybrid within the multi-cultural Nation is targeted by the publishing industry, by television products such as “The George López Show” (ABC) and the “Latin Grammys,” and by media-constructed personalities such as Jennifer López, Marc Anthony, and Cristina Salaberri, among others. Hybridity, as a dominant paradigm for cultural exchange, has a clear correlative in practices of production and consumption, particularly in products intended for mass distribution. I could even suggest that cultural commodities become the preferred vehicle for hegemonizing *latinidad* and for creating a totalizing image of a diverse community. I advocate interrupting this production and consumption dynamic, by focusing on sites where the meta-narrative of the US Latino community (of its *hegemonization* and hybridization) fails to produce a stable image of the same group. Furthermore, I reiterate that, from a theoretical level, a discourse on community should be scrutinized and made momentarily impracticable to underscore its capacity for homogenizing difference, reproducing oppression, and facilitating a hegemonic program.

Reading cadavers

Representations of cadavers in US Latino cultural products disrupt communitarian discourse, hegemonic conceptualizations of Latinos as a hybrid other, and broad production and consumption of cultural commodities in the United States. Cadavers, to be clear, are overloaded with meaning.⁷ From the Renaissance on, portraying human bodies has allowed us to regard “our inner reality, [the body has been] a medium through which we imagine society, culture and the human condition” (National Library of Medicine, 2004). A constellation of representations of cadavers brings in a collectivity to observe and be seen with a corpse.⁸ Aside from some economic matters of interest,⁹ the idea of a collective standing in front of a body underscores the curiosity of humanity viewing deceased persons. Moreover, these scenes point toward the style in which a collectivity becomes signified through these encounters, in its political and historical necessity. One only needs to recall photographs of humans killed by violent state repression of workers or in Nazi Germany’s extermination camps.¹⁰ The importance of this symbol becomes more compelling when we

5 Although present space constraints inhibit my exploration of additional intellectuals, it would be of interest to consider a wider spectrum of ideological and critical positions in the work of cultural critics such as Juan Flores, José D. Saldívar, Frances Aparicio, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Ilán Staváns, and to extricate, from an otherwise complex critical and ideological entanglement, the repetition of the narrative of hybridization.

6 For shrewd discussions on the administrative logic of the State that mediates the formation of need-based identities, see Flores and Yúdice (1993), “Living Borders/*Buscando América: Languages of Latino Self-Formation*”; Suzanne Oboler (1995), *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives*; Carl Gutiérrez Jones’s *Critical Race Narratives* (2001); and Ian Haney López’s (2003) *Racism on Trial: The Chicano Fight for Justice*. Similarly, Paul Gilroy (2000), in

Against Race, has criticized the pervasiveness of racial thinking even in progressive anti-racist intellectuals and artists.

7 As Jean Luc Nancy forcefully states:

“Community is revealed in the death of others... because death itself is the true community of Is that are not egos... .

[Community] assumes the impossibility of its own immanence, the impossibility of a communitarian being in the form of the subject” (1991, 15). Death becomes, in the philosopher’s reflection, locates an ontological lack and stresses the ethical substance of communal articulation. It repeals a sense of collective project or destiny, or individual identities.

8 One need only think of Rembrandt’s “The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp” (1632), Andreas Vesalius anatomical theater woodcuts (in *De Humani Corporis Fabrica*, Vesalius, 1543), Étienne de la Rivière’s curious portrayals of dissected bodies in social settings or in live positions (in *La dissection des parties*

consider its contemporary proliferation in television programs such as *CSI* (CBS), *CSI Miami* (CBS), and *Six Feet Under* (HBO), which have as their pretext creating a narrative for a dead human (invariably gendered or racialized). These shows re-work the story of how a victim perished, and the investigation extracts social meaning from this event, because, customarily, the death occurred as a consequence of failed social interactions. Furthermore, the after-effect of these television programs highlights how vulnerable the nation’s social contract is and how difficult it is to renegotiate a new order. I propose that this reiterative *topos* locates the subaltern: “the absolute limit of the place where history is narrativized into logic” (Spivak, 1988, 16). I also associate the cadaver with Kristeva’s notion of “radical otherness,” which suggests that the remainder in the process of communitarian articulation originates a new ontological space.¹¹

The cadaver is indeed a symbol to be critically considered and discreetly theorized. To continue our specific interrogation, it is a revealing point of entry to unread hegemonic cultural products that portray Latinos and to strategically interrupt problematic notions of *latinidad* – like the ones that I have been discussing. To be sure, a plethora of US Latino texts depict dead bodies. In Rolando Hinojosa Smith’s (1986) novel, *Claros Varones de Belken* (Editorial Bilingue, 1986), a catalog of quotes from dead, historical characters begins the novel, pointing at the *longue durée* of the Rio Grande Valley Mexican-American enclave, beginning with the 18th century. The pantheon of *mexicanos*, notable predecessors of the story’s characters, exposes a cemetery in this Hispanic settlement; the roll of dead persons organizes the town’s geography, its history, and the affective order of a “Valley covered by ranches and towns” (10). At the end of the novel, Esteban Echevarría, one of the Mexican elders, speaks about his own death and announces that the region’s pre-modern social structure, its time-honored cultural practices, the centrality of Spanish, and the ethical substance that structures the community will soon expire. Luis Valdez’s (1982) 1978 play, *Zoot Suit* (adapted to film by Universal Studios in 1982), dramatizes the historical event of a young man’s death, by an unidentifiable young Chicano during a brawl, and the subsequent criminal case against several Mexican-American teenagers. This symbolic cadaver recalls the prevailing violence in US society during World War II, it recollects the 1942 California “Zoot Suit Riots,” and illustrates the racial violence from which a Chicano social movement eventually sprung. The dead body becomes a polysemous sign that critiques racial bias in the US legal system, problematizes ethno-racial hierarchies, and reflects upon symbolic and real violence (war, as well as political repression) as intervening factors in the articulation of a communitarian subject.

Dead people are represented in Piri Thomas’ (1967) *Down These Mean Streets* (published by Knopf 1967, and re-edited by Vintage in 1997), Sandra Cisneros’ (1983) *The House on Mango Street* (originally published by Arte

Público in 1983, later republished by Vintage), and Oscar Hijuelos' (1989) *The Mambo Kings* (winner of the Pulitzer for novel in 1990; published by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, and later adapted to film – with Assante and Banderas, 1992). The ubiquitous *topos* appears in multiple styles and settings, with more importance in some narrations, more superficially in others.¹² Although the specific connotations of this symbol changes from one cultural commodity to another, its frequency underscores the culture industry's desire to foster (and even commodify) empathy and, at the same time, to aestheticize a traumatic integration into the host country's imaginary. I propose, at a different level, that the corpse evinces a disruptive effect because it pauses the uncomplicated consumption of Latino cultural products.

In order to more directly underscore the symbolic value of cadavers within Latino literary production, I will discuss their appearance in Santiago's *When I Was Puerto Rican*, Fernández's *Raining Backwards*, and Piñero's play *Short Eyes*. I choose these three texts because they have received ample critical attention and appear frequently in courses dealing with Latino literature and culture. As such, this grouping insinuates critical tendencies within the field of Latino Studies and permits an indirect critique of prevalent modes of producing, consuming, and studying Latino cultural identity and its communitarian discourse. Additionally, these texts serve as interesting case studies to put into practice a model for un-reading: they correspond to three different periods in recent Latino literary production (1990s, 1980s, 1970s, respectively); they represent three literary genres (memoirs, post-modern novel, and drama); and they evince divergent ideological intentions. Santiago's work has been produced by commercial publishing conglomerates, Fernández's novel was issued by a non-profit publisher, and Piñero's play was staged in New York's Off-Broadway theater circuit. To be clear, my broader intent is not to exhaust the interpretations of these texts or to suggest an over-arching analytical scheme to deploy indiscriminately on any Latino text. Rather, I endeavor to develop critical tools that permit a strategic interruption of a persistent discourse on *latinidad* – which I have been discussing in the opening pages of this article.

Esmeralda Santiago's mourning

When I Was Puerto Rican narrates the coming of age of a Puerto Rican girl in the second half of the 20th century.¹³ This self-ethnography, now distributed by Vintage, depicts Esmeralda's leaving her bucolic homeland and coming of age in Brooklyn, New York. The protagonist becomes an educated person, learns a new language and a new set of social values, and embodies the cultural blend of her immigrant identity. Becoming a US subject indexes the death of an older self (thus the title of the book *When I Was Puerto Rican*). A series of cadavers appears in the story placing the narrator-protagonist in touch with the death of

du corps humain, de la Rivière, 1546) to ascertain not only the fascination with the human corpse, but more importantly the symbolic density of cadavers in European Renaissance. Of note is the Internet exposition *Dream Anatomy*, sponsored by the National Institutes of Health, which reproduces digitally the work of Vesalius and de la Rivière.

9 Jessica Hodge explains that dissection paintings where a type of group portrait “representing a number of men in terms of a common role or function The basic problem with this type of representation was to combine a number of portraits of equal individual distinction – each subject paid a proportion of the fee and therefore expected equal prominence – into a coherent whole” (Hodge, 1995, 13). What is of interest in this practice is that a morbid scene becomes a commodity and that it simultaneously addresses aesthetic, academic, social, and economical matters.

10 Cf. Lee Miller's (1945) “Cordwood Piles of Corpses, Dachau.”

11 In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva declares: “if what remains of a sacrifice can be called abject, in another connection consuming the leavings of a sacrifice can also be the cause of good rebirths and can even lead to finding salvation” (Kristeva, 1982, 76).

12 The publishing venues that mediated the production and reception of these indicate a broad desire to procure Latino cultural commodities and a concomitant narrative of consumption that relates to the mediation of commercial or independent publishers. It would be of interest to further meditate on how historical injuries and death become commodities.

13 Santiago’s major works, *When I Was Puerto Rican* (1993), *Almost a Woman* (1998), *America’s Dream* (1996), and *The Turkish Lover* (2004) have been sponsored, distributed internationally, and swiftly translated into various languages by major publishing conglomerates. Santiago is a veritable Latina literary star,

others and, symbolically, with her old persona. Esmeralda’s father leaves home, her mother, Monín, becomes the household’s bread winner, and the fragmented family moves erratically from idyllic countryside quarters to inauspicious neighborhoods in San Juan, Puerto Rico, eventually relocating to precarious habitats in Brooklyn. *When I Was Puerto Rican* gives an account of Esmeralda’s loss and, metonymically, tells the story of a generation of displaced compatriots that come collectively into being, as their pre-modern cultural identity disappears. A new fictive ethnicity emerges from the demise of agrarian society (and *criollista* imaginings), traditional familial structures, and stable relations of the subject with geography.

In Santiago’s work, cadavers allude to the bereavement of a collective and suggest a communal *thanatopraxis* – mourning – to bestow meaning upon the loss of an old identity. In a significant chapter, Esmeralda had recently relocated from her pastoral mountain home to a San Juan dwelling in a malodorous and unsanitary “*barrio* [that] floated on a black lagoon” (1998, 133). In the meantime, the child was working through the formidable changes assailing her young life. Doña Cony, a resident of her new neighborhood, as a special favor, asks the girl to close the eyes of her recently deceased baby, whose soul would be “trapped in his body” if left open-eyed (143). A *curandera* – healer – had selected Esmeralda because she deemed that “a powerful spirit [was] protecting” her, “always there watching ... so that nothing bad can happen” (146). Dressed in her best white dress, the girl performs the rite and receives the gratitude of the family and the recognition of the sector. Working a cadaver is staged as a joint endeavor. The rite suggests mourning a pre-modern national identity, whose soul is “trapped,” thereby insinuating that the national community needs to let go of its erstwhile hierarchy of values and its expired imagined identity. The protagonist facilitates this transition, signifying that the writer has been called upon, like her younger self in the story, to bring to a close this historical stage for her national community.

Another dead body is brought to the fore when Esmeralda moves to New York, becomes an adolescent, and engages the institutions of her new environs (e.g., school, library, welfare office, public housing, sites of consumption). Since the family’s new Brooklyn apartment is near a public housing project, which mother Monín characterizes as exceptionally dangerous, Esmeralda is instructed, in a manner reminiscent of Little Red Ridinghood’s fairy-tale, to “take the long way to school and not cut across the projects” (232). Although Monín does not acknowledge it, Esmeralda had read a disturbing report in the Spanish-language newspaper: “a man had taken a nine-year-old girl to the roof of one of the [project’s] buildings, raped her, and thrown her over the side, down twenty-one stories” (231). Out of curiosity, Esmeralda infiltrates into this proscribed landscape “because [she] wanted to find the spot where the girl had fallen” and, in her audacious expedition, ponders the specifics of the girl’s death and the particular difficulties of life in this precarious locality. The cadaver

indexes the perils of the urban setting and structures an emotional cartography of movement for the protagonist on the way to school. As such, it situates a pedagogical marker in the process of becoming a citizen-subject. The dead body additionally elicits an ethical response from the narrator-protagonist who recognizes the need to breach boundaries that segregate the social body, create spatial hierarchies, and order the production of knowledge.

In *When I Was Puerto Rican*, dead bodies signify a breakdown in the process of communitarian articulation, a stoppage in the construction of an inclusive, non-hierarchical community. Cadavers interrupt the meta-narrative of successful integration of Latinos into US multi-cultural society by disturbing what Stuart Hall would call the “dominant-hegemonic position” (Hall, 1993, 102). This self-ethnography’s integrationist plot reproduces hegemonic values, supports a dominant view of cultural integration, and defends the assimilation of *latinidad* into the multi-cultural Nation. I must also remark that a major publishing conglomerate puts out this text and supports said hegemonic notions of the Latino community while it fosters dominant orders of production and consumption.¹⁴ Contradicting a market-supported hegemonic position, the dead body refers to “a sort of residual subject sovereignty” in the assimilation process (Moreiras, 2001, 64), and avows a point of entry to unread the ideological framework of the story and offer a critical counter-reading of Esmeralda’s coming-of-age tale.¹⁵

Esmeralda becomes a model case for Latina – and specifically Puerto Rican – integration, because her memoirs and her future autobiographical narratives insist on her graduating from a selective high school in New York and later from Harvard. Nevertheless, the narration only briefly remarks that none of her siblings attended college. As such, the metonymic narration of her community is interrupted when it is revealed that Santiago’s own story is not reproduced by her siblings. Similarly, the image of the cadaver disrupts the dominant meta-narrative and allows the readers to begin un-reading the triumphant coming-of-age story by focusing upon the instances of failure in the process of assimilation/hegemonization. The reader can then dwell on US colonial interventions in Puerto Rico, pervasive sexual aggression, capitalist exploitation of labor, criminal violence in New York, and Esmeralda’s unsuccessful siblings. An alternative critical reading begins to emerge in opposition to a commercialized and hegemonic narrative.

Although this analysis does not wish to impose a single-minded hegemonic intentionality on cultural commodities produced and distributed by major publishing conglomerates (e.g., Knopf, Penguin, Bantam, Random House, Vintage, and Farrar, Straus and Giroux), it would be naïve to disregard that these venues favor more marketable and anodyne portrayals of *latinidad*. An oppositional model for reading, starting with the *topos* of the cadaver, permits us to critically engage other more commercial literary products by authors the likes of Julia Álvarez, Cristina García, Oscar Hijuelos, and Ana Castillo.

and her production has achieved an elevated commodity value. Very few Latina writers have a comparable status: Ana Castillo, Julia Álvarez, and Cristina García. The highly commercial nature of her literary endeavor must be seriously taken into account, and similarities with other Latina stars (such as Jennifer López) should not be ignored.

14 For a scholarly consideration of corporate mediation in the construction of the Latino community, see Arlene Dávila’s (2001) *Latinos Inc.*, where the cultural critic studies how market forces support particular notions of *latinidad* in a multi-cultural society and a globalized economy.

15 In Stuart Hall’s framework of production and consumption, this un-reading of dominant narratives would be called an “oppositional code” (1993, 103).

Not only do these literary stars enjoy a very broad readership but they have also become public intellectuals that help translate Latinos into the core of the US national imaginary, and as such, they work in synchrony with a broad program to hegemonize *latinidad*.

Roberto Fernández's tortured body

Cuban-American Roberto Fernández, the author of the post-modern, pastiche novel *Raining Backwards*, exists on a different plane of cultural production. In contrast with more commercial products (like *When I Was Puerto Rican*), Fernández's work has always been published by not-for-profit venues such as Miami's Universal and Houston's Arte Público, many of his stories circulated in literary magazines in the United States and abroad, and his readership is predominantly academic and on the fringe of mainstream culture. His most successful work, *Raining Backwards*, puts forth a fragmentary tale of several Cuban-American, South Florida families that painfully construct a new collective identity and struggle with the differences between first- and second-generation members of the community.¹⁶ Fernández brings into literature the clash between English and Spanish, Cuban and US identities, and exile and immigrant ethics. In contrast with more palatable, more commercial histories of Latino integration, his work disdains homogeneous collective identities, fluid tales of integration, and inspiring portrayals of *latinidad*. English and Spanish continually interfere in the literary encoding, characters oscillate in their demeanor and basic attributes, and the narrative voice varies radically in tone, perspective, and credibility. The author plunders from historical archives and government documents, plagiarizes and ridicules canonical literary texts, abandons realism as a representational mode, and puts forth the counter-narrative of uncomplicated integration or joyful hybridization.

A crucial sub-plot deals with the death of Caridad, a Cuban-American cheerleader who had enthusiastically embraced the host country's geography, culture, and language. James Carter and Lt. Hodel, an odd couple of Dade County detectives – droll evocations of Conan Doyle's Holmes and Watson – find the girl's cadaver hanging from a *ceiba* tree. The girl, who went by the names of Connie, in English, and Caridad, in Spanish, personifies the evolution of the Cuban community in the process of constructing a new hybrid collective. Throughout the first half of the novel, the narrator depicts the girl's struggles trying to fit into a hegemonic social landscape. Connie/Caridad becomes part of the cheerleading squad, negotiates difficulties of an inter-ethnic romance with a popular Anglo-American classmate, and deals with the racist aggressions of a jealous female classmate who establishes a xenophobic organization called the "Tongue Brigade" (that defended English-only laws in Florida). All the while, the Cuban-American teenager attempts to construct a new identity and cope with a traditional, Cuban hierarchy of values enforced by her parents.

16 It is, at this point, unavoidable to consider this inter-generational conflict without making reference to Rubén G. Rumbaut's memorable formulation of the "one-and-a-half generation" (Rumbaut, 1976), which is at the core of Pérez Firmat's *Life on the Hyphen*, discussed earlier.

Her death indexes the violence of the dominant host culture and highlights the limits of coming of age as personified heterogeneity (as an individual and metonymically as a collective). The narrative voice carefully describes the image of the corpse:

Though there were rope marks on her neck, she was hanging from her feet. She looked more like a dead chicken in a Guatemalan market than a human corpse... . The victim was clad only in pink transparent panties, revealing a pale, skinny, and slightly hairy body. [The detective] immediately noticed that someone had tried to remove one of her breasts, since it had a big diagonal cut just below the base. There was a blob of flesh and dried blood a few yards from the girl's head. It looked like a piece of liver... someone had tried to put out a cigarette on the victim's buttocks, not one but five times... . Hodel turned again to face the girl. He studied her swollen face and the long, silky black hair which was dusting the ground and wondered if she might have been pretty. (1997, 148–149)

At one level, the body becomes a marker for a lack of individual subjectivity. Murder deprived Connie/Caridad of a stable, living identity. Her mutilated body appears as a graphic iteration of the implicit violence in the process of hybridization – a far cry from a joyful cultural exchange.

Additionally, the corpse establishes a zero point of reference to ascertain unity between members of the group because, as a defunct member, it organizes a collectivity in mourning.¹⁷ It also exemplifies the symbolic violence of the host culture for it bears the stigmata of otherness, allegorically standing in for the communitarian body. Suggestively, the quoted description exhibits a problematic degree of eroticism, as the narrative voice draws attention to the victim's breasts, buttocks, and intimate garments; it flaunts a gauche esthetic tone, simultaneously gory and erotic. I suggest that Connie/Caridad's body establishes itself as an ontological void. Her body grounds the community in an event that cannot be turned into coherent meaning. The monumental symbol, an image akin to Deleuze and Guattari's *Body without Organs*, inscribes the desire to counter "the psychoanalytic interpretation of the phantasy;" it interrupts the desire of reformulating a whole, homogenous, and cogent communitarian identity (1998, 151).¹⁸

Carter and Hodel initiate an investigation that attempts to *solve* the murder and, metaphorically, to signify the social implications of this gruesome homicide for the Cuban-American community and the broader social milieu. In vain, the detectives pursue leads relating to a militant xenophobic and monolingual organization called the Tongue Brigade; they consider the possibility that this death was a *Santería* ritualistic sacrifice, because the *ceiba* tree has religious significance for this faith; and they wonder if Caridad may have committed suicide. Carter finally cracks the mystery following a deductive methodology lifted from Sherlock Holmes. He determines that the cheerleader had died as a

17 It is now impossible to discuss the literary representation of the mutilated, Latina cadaver without bearing in mind the real murderous violence that is directed particularly and systematically at women along the US–México border. Although my present interrogation is more concerned with disrupting an uncomplicated narrative of Latino hybridization, I consider it necessary to point at the symbolic and real violence articulated by dominant culture,

the specific reiteration of said violence against the female subject, and the social, historic, and geographic uniqueness of violent incidents and episodes. It is also of value to consider that real violence is never symbolically or ideologically neutral, and that the cadavers become powerful signifiers that have immense organizing force to bring together a community that mourns its deceased member.

18 Deleuze and Guattari define the Body without Organs as “what is left when you take everything away. What you take away is precisely the phantasy, and significances and subjectifications as a whole.” They suggest a program that prescribes unfettered individual (intellectual, physical, psychological) experimentation instead of psychoanalytic interpretation: “Where psychoanalysis says, “Stop, find your self again... we should say ... Let’s go further still, we haven’t found our BwO yet, we haven’t sufficiently dismantled our self” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1998, 151).

partial consequence of her own suicide attempt and the brutal interrogation of the Tongue Brigade’s leader, in a perverted amalgamation of jealousy, passion, and xenophobia. The closing episodes of the novel tell of a whimsical evolution of Caridad from a flighty cheerleader into a chaste martyr, eventually promoted to sainthood in the Catholic Church, prompting “the erection of Connie’s Cathedral, the biggest temple of the world,” and originating a religious revolutionary movement (198).

If the tortured cadaver disrupts the narrative of fluid hybridization and symbolizes the remains produced by the processes of consumption (or of integration through consumption), the symbolic working of this death blocks the desire to construct a communal subject. Furthermore, parody overruns the narrative and defeats the intent of manufacturing a homogeneous cultural identity and a straightforward tale of Cubans becoming Cuban-Americans. *Raining Backwards* draws attention to the impossibility of total communitarian articulation within the host nation.

Raining Backwards’s literary project diverges significantly from *When I Was Puerto Rican*’s more hegemonic one. Fernández advances a different mode of representing *latinidad* – more specifically, *cubanidad* – by steering clear of hegemonic teleologies of hybridization. The cadaver is central to *Raining Backwards* as is the intractable heterogeneity of new cultural forms and social hierarchies stemming from Latino and Cuban incursion in the United States. Considering Fernández’s work broadly, chaos, violence, and trauma turn out to be central ordering aspects of identitarian transformations (albeit in a bizarre and ludicrous style). Critically reading the image of the cadaver allows highlighting alternative portrayals of *latinidad* that do not promote an ethos of integration and that embrace fringe circuits of cultural production and consumption. This model for un-reading could be extended to other writers who disrupt joyful portrayals of Latino integration and hybridization. These authors insist on graphically depicting the epistemic trauma of difference and cultural integration. In this cohort we can find Tato Laviera (“Jesús Papote,” In *AmeRícan*, 1985, Arte Público, 2003), Jimmy Santiago Baca (*A Place to Stand*, Grove, 2001), Luis Valdez (*Zoot Suit*, 1979), Pedro Pietri (*Puerto Rican Obituary*, Friends of Malatesta, 1971), Ruth Behar (“Jewish Cemetery in Guanabacoa, 1992”), Gloria Anzaldúa (*Borderlands/La frontera*, Aunt Lute, 1987), Erika López (*Flaming Iguanas*, Simon & Schuster, 1997), and Migdalia Cruz (*Fur*, Latino Chicago Theater Company, 1997; published in *Out of the Fringe*, 2000), to name a few whose work tellingly appears mostly in non-profit production venues.

Miguel Piñero’s ritualistic killing

In a similar order, Miguel Piñero’s 1973 prison drama *Short Eyes* (Piñero, 1977 film adaptation by Piñero and director Robert Young), stages the production of

a cadaver. The *enfant terrible* of the Nuyorican literary group dramatizes the community of a detention center that deals with the arrival of a pedophile, a *short eyes*, who has been accused of raping young girls. Dialogues reveal that the portrayed section had achieved a high degree of social stability by creating, after a recent riot, a Council of War. Representatives from three ethnic or racial groups compose the Council, establishing rules of behavior and guaranteeing safe cohabitation among inmates. This exemplary system of governmentality segregates tables in the lock-out area, sets up an explicit social hierarchy, allows for controlled commerce of narcotics and cigarettes, and institutes the rules by which a convict can engage in sexual intercourse, participate in fights, or commit murders. All in all, the detention center's warden and deputies consider this floor a model prison unit.

Two matters threaten the social order. First, several prisoners are sexually attracted to a young Puerto Rican man, Julio, who goes by the prison moniker Cupcakes, but the Council prohibits nonconsensual intercourse with heterosexual inmates. Prisoners whom the group labels as "stuff," however, are considered viable as sexual partners, even for forced intercourse. Strong homosexual desire for Cupcakes and several attempts on the young man's body have escalated tensions between two Puerto Ricans: Juan, the voice of reason in the section, and Paco, a somewhat unstable and violent character. Second, the floor's peace has been disturbed by the arrival of the *short eyes*, Clark Davis, who is professional and Anglo. As per a confession to Juan, Clark has raped many young girls and pursues preferably Puerto Rican and African-American children. The collective despises him, and the hostility toward him exacerbates the tensions within the social order. As inmates vent their frustration toward him, Juan tries to protect the *short eyes* to preserve stability within the group.

Cruz Malavé writes, in an astute queer reading of the play, that the desire for Cupcakes "threatens to disrupt the hierarchical chain of subjections on which the prison system is based by inverting its directionality" (Cruz Malavé, 1996, 141). This micro-society has established a high degree of governmentality. It has successfully contained social practices, encapsulated ethnic cohorts, and constructed a stable hierarchy of groups and persons. The precarious moral territory of the jail can only be justified through the vehement subjection of individuals and behaviors. The micro-society stages a strategic substitution by which, instead of raping Cupcakes, who is Puerto Rican and a member in good standing of the set, the characters turn their sexual urges toward Clark. To purge the mounting tension, the Council, less Juan, decides to gang rape Clark, and turns him into "stuff."

This gang rape becomes a ritualistic act of communal purging. The collective seminal discharge would become a metaphor for the expulsion of accumulated hostility. This act, thus, relates to social oppression, embodies racial dynamics, and reifies the nation's logic of exclusion. At a literal level, Clark is raped for being a deviant who preys upon children. At a metaphoric level, the act

embodies a ritualistic inversion of the social order and the rules of cohabitation in society at large. Additionally, difference (social, ethnic, and racial) is temporarily erased between the members of the raping set: they become one in their orgiastic violence and momentarily forget their divisions and frequent struggles for social space and privilege within the prison.

The excesses of the rape carry over, as hatred and eros entangle. Clark, a reification of the proverbial sacrificial lamb, complicates the vehement struggle of the society to “turn” him when he cries out: “Go ‘head, you filthy bastards. Go ‘head ... I’ll tell the captain. I’ll bring you all before the courts. You bastards” (93). The threat instantly justifies the sacrifice of the “freak.” The attackers hold him down and present a knife to El Raheem, a Black Muslim who throughout the play verbalizes his virulent animosity toward Whites. Despite his radical hatred, El Raheem turns down the role. Longshoe, the leader of the section’s White group, takes the knife and slits Clark’s throat while shouting “Scream, bastard ... rat ... scream ... monster ...” (97). The substitution impedes reading this killing as the result of simple dichotomous, racial hatred. When Longshoe, a White member of the community, kills one of his own, he performs a communitarian necessity of sacrificing subjects who do not acquiesce to the collective project. Furthermore, the rite symbolizes a peace offering from the White subset to the other racial groups, because Clark had preyed upon young Latina and African-American girls.

By murdering *Short Eyes* the inmate community avoids the disruption of the social order and, more importantly, strengthens itself via a bloody sacrifice. The assassination, a graphic symbol of violent exclusion, founds a collective ego in the encounter with the corpse. The set becomes one in orgy and violence through an act that reorganizes the affects of the prison society, redirecting its hatred towards a deviant other. At a basic level, the murder plays out the community’s historical necessity.

In considering the production–consumption arc, *Short Eyes* is clearly a prison drama that brings to task the oppressive and violent nature of the penal system. The play reflects upon the tense social dynamics of racialized groups of inmates and the social hierarchy created in the margins of the Nation. It stages the microcosm of the prison floor to explore the dynamics of inclusion, exclusion, and violent repression in a multi-cultural and multi-racial society. *Short Eyes* carries a counter-pedagogical project; it unmistakably works against hegemonic values and obliterates the myth of easy integration and hybridization. The multi-cultural ethos of the Nation, as seen in Piñero’s drama, contains the vehement struggle for power and privilege, and the necessity to renegotiate social unity through violence and sacrifice. Developed by amateur, ex-convict, semi-professional actors, this play epitomizes in its production infrastructure and distribution venues the counter-hegemonic program it performs. Piñero’s play never gained the exchange value of *When I Was Puerto Rican* or other

highly commercial Latino cultural commodities.¹⁹ Although it enjoyed passing success – earning various reputable prizes including a New York Drama Critics Award and two Obies (given by the *Village Voice* to plays performed in the fringy Off-Broadway circuit) (Piñero, 2000, xi) – ,²⁰ it remained outside of highly commercial theater circuits. *Short Eyes* does not aim at creating an esthetically pleasing portrayal of a multi-cultural society or of *latinidad* in the process of becoming hegemonic. For this reason, Clark’s slaying epitomizes the failure of hegemonizing *latinidad* at the level of consumption, and points at the interruption of an unproblematic and fluid reception of the play. Like in *Raining Backwards*, the uncomplicated reception of the cultural product is interrupted, in synchrony with the counter-pedagogic values of these alternative literary products.

Problematizing Latino hegemonization

In the works we have discussed, the reiterative appearance of the cadaver exposes a *locus* of excess that underscores a malfunction in the process of creating a cogent collective subject. The disruption of a meta-narrative of entering into hegemonic circuits of power and culture, points toward a new historical horizon, as a narrative of community appears in the literary and political terrain. The “logic of death” (following Nancy, 1991) problematizes the ideal of total communitarian articulation. Furthermore, it interrupts the fluidity of cultural consumption. Cultural products that stage the excesses of differentiation and the construction of the collective Ego graphically replicate the inherent irrationality involved in the process of communitarian articulation.

As can be seen, a critique of a meta-narrative of cultural exchange and hybridization that informs US Latino cultural production is in order. As I have remarked, said narrative, as deployed from a variety of ideological and critical positions, may indirectly reproduce a hegemonic hierarchy of values and a broad program of administering diversity within the multi-cultural Nation. My project all along has been to interrupt this fluid meta-narrative of hybridization and to highlight the problematic nature of such discourse by critically engaging the image of the cadaver. In this critical endeavor, I locate a new paradigm of hybridity that dislocates a teleology of ethno-racial integration, sets up a new standard of heterogeneity, and recognizes the implicit violence in an overriding program of Latino hegemonization.

At one level, the topos of the cadaver points toward a new standard for consuming Latino culture. The esthetic project engaged by the likes of Roberto Fernández and Miguel Piñero disrupts the consumptive relation and assaults the senses of the reader or spectator. The portrayal of tortured bodies or of ritualistic killings suspends esthetic pleasure. These images are at odds with the anodyne images of sexual icons Ricky Martin and Jennifer López, or the

¹⁹ It is of great importance to recognize two primary levels in discussing cultural production. One deals with the commercial value of cultural works as they become more or less profitable to cultural enterprises. In this regard, Santiago’s literary products exist in highly commercial circuits of production; they enjoy greater exchange value *vis à vis* Fernández’s and Piñero’s lower profitability. On a second level, production and consumption deal with ideology and knowledge. More commercial products generally circulate in hegemonic circuits and reproduce dominant ideology and knowledge. In this regard, Santiago’s work, again, functions in a different sphere and mostly reproduces dissimilar orders of knowledge and ideology. At present, it is essential to underscore the divergent circuits of culture in which the products discussed exist; and to recognize the contradictory ideological values they convey.

²⁰ Piñero himself would never muster sufficient cultural capital to enjoy more

than a cult following, make some acting appearances in *Kojak* and *Miami Vice* (where he was also a script doctor), and see his master-work turned into an independent film (directed by Indy movie's luminary, Robert M. Young). Leon Ichaso's (2002) film on Piñero's life, though an interesting highlight in his post-mortem career, further underscores the marginal status of the Nuyorican writer.

jubilant persona of George López. At another level, the object of this study recalls the violent struggle that implies entering a new cultural and social landscape. Crossing boundaries, being translated, and bearing the stigma of otherness may not be characterized as a fluid process. The host nation enforces repressive linguistic policies, encapsulates ethnic minorities, and establishes a social hierarchy. Even if the process of entering a multi-cultural order is partially successful, profound sorrow and pain remains. The cadaver highlights the leftovers and excretions of this progression and, at a theoretical level, the impossibility of communitarian immanence.

Finally, the discourse of hybridity celebrates an essential admixture within the Latino community. This sameness-in-difference purports to be progressive and inclusive but, from our perspective, it reproduces a "fictive ethnicity," a totalizing ethos, a sense of historical necessity. At its best, this "fictive ethnicity" enfranchises a marginalized community; at its worst, it reproduces the symbolic and real violence of the nation-state. My purpose, as repeatedly stated, was to strategically pause this narrative of fluid hybridization in order to reflect upon its value and meaning and to promote a new standard of heterogeneity that problematizes a totalizing communitarian discourse, a facile consumptive relation within dominant culture, and an uncritical celebration of multi-culturality within the nation.

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