

Lifting The Curtain: How Lin-Manuel Miranda Challenged West Side Story's Cultural Stereotypes

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*"Finally a role where I do not have to carry a gun, I am not in a gang, I am not selling drugs. I'm just a normal human being who happens to be Hispanic and who happens to live in this wonderful place called Washington Heights."*¹ – Robin de Jesús

Four Tony Awards, including Best Musical. A Grammy Award for Best Musical Show Album. A nomination for the 2009 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Lin-Manuel Miranda did not quietly emerge, but rather, exploded onto the theatrical scene. His debut musical, *In The Heights* (2008), swept Broadway and catapulted Miranda onto center stage. The diversification of Broadway theatre over the prior decade had provided Miranda with a stage upon which to showcase both the plight and the rich culture of the Latino community in Washington Heights, New York. He seized this opportunity, creating a vibrant cityscape by employing a nontraditional score of rap and Latin music to invoke the foot-tapping pulse intrinsic to the Latino community. However, Miranda's mission went beyond entertainment to a deep-rooted desire to use the Broadway spotlight to dispel commonly accepted, cultural stereotypes of Latino immigrants. While the characters portrayed in the play trace their roots to Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, Miranda's message could be extrapolated to other Latino nationalities. Success often attracts criticism and some critics accused Miranda of depicting an idealized picture of life in Washington Heights. While these critics may have been correct, the overwhelming acclaim for *In The Heights* served to validate Miranda's goal of creating positive roles for Latino thespians and mitigating negative stereotypes of Latinos generally. His success was all the more poignant as the play was showcased in a traditionally white space.

The plot of *In The Heights* explored the theme of home reflecting Miranda's quest to identify his own home. Historically, immigrants and subsequent generations have struggled to find their home in new countries. The immigrants were torn having experienced life in both their birth and adopted countries while subsequent generations found themselves trapped between their parents' traditions and those of their new country leaving them unsettled. Was home the family's native country, the current neighborhood, or a combination of both places? In the musical's finale, the protagonist, Usnavi, reconciled his own conflicting notions of home: "If you close your eyes, that hydrant is a beach./ That siren is a breeze, that fire escape's a leaf on a palm tree/ [...] I found my island/ I've been on it this whole time."² Usnavi concluded that his home was his neighborhood or barrio. Miranda wrote *In The Heights* as a way to resolve his own identity issues as a first generation Puerto Rican.³ Usnavi's revelation that he found his island mirrored Miranda's own realization that Washington Heights always had been and always would be his home: a place where he could be at once both Latino and American.

Although *In The Heights* was set in Washington Heights, Lin-Manuel Miranda grew up in the adjacent neighborhood of Inwood, which shared a similar demographic, social and economic profile. Apart from 1998 – 2002 when he attended Wesleyan University, Miranda has never lived farther than fifteen blocks from the home

¹ *In the Heights: Chasing Broadway Dreams*, in *Great Performances*, directed by Paul Bozymowski (2009; New York, NY: PBS), television.

² Quiara Alegría Hudes and Lin-Manuel Miranda, "Finale," Act II in *In the heights: the complete book and lyrics of the Broadway musical* (Milwaukee: Applesauce Theatre & Cinema Books, 2013), 152.

³ Bozymowski, "In The Heights: Chasing Broadway Dreams."

where he grew up.⁴ Describing his return from a recent vacation post-*Hamilton*, his latest Broadway success, Miranda explained that he was “tearfully glad to see the George Washington Bridge again”⁵, as he “[relaxed] more in [his] neighborhood because [he] [knew] where all the *stuff* [was]”⁶ and was “comfortable with the noise and seeing other Latinos around [him].”⁷ He admitted: “there [was] an ease I [felt] from 168th Street to the end of the island that I [didn’t] feel anywhere else on earth.”⁸ Miranda’s emotional connection to the Washington Heights/Inwood neighborhood with its colorful and vibrant community underpinned *In The Heights*.

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Miranda was the second child and only son of two successful Puerto Rican immigrants. Miranda’s parents, Luis Miranda Jr. and Luz Towns-Miranda had met in a psychology graduate program at NYU. While Luz had become a child psychiatrist, Luis had pursued a career outside of psychology, ultimately serving as a high-profile political consultant for several New York mayors, including a role as “a special advisor for Hispanic Affairs [as well as] Director of the Mayor’s Office for Hispanic Affairs”⁹ under Mayor Ed Koch in the 1980s. Then, “in 1990, Luis became the founding President of the Hispanic Federation, one of the nation’s leading Latino nonprofit organizations dedicated to addressing the human services and health needs of the Hispanic community.”¹⁰ Luis Miranda’s position in New York government

4 Juan Gonzales, “Gonzales: Family’s Big Role with ‘Hamilton’ on Broadway,” *Daily News: New York* (August 6, 2015). <http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/gonzalez-family-helps-bring-hamilton-broadway-article-1.2317665> (Accessed November 25, 2016).

5 Michael Paterniti, “Lin-Manuel Miranda Is Ready for His Next Act,” *GQ*. (September 20, 2016), <http://www.gq.com/story/lin-manuel-miranda-profile-gq-cover> (Accessed November 25, 2016).

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 “Luis A. Miranda, Jr.,” MirRam Group. <http://www.mirramgroup.com/luis-miranda-jr/> (Accessed November 30, 2016).

rendered him influential in Washington Heights as he had the ability to help shape issues facing the Latino community. Although Miranda’s family was not wealthy, their social capital placed them at the top of the hierarchy within the barrio.

Their heightened social status was evident in the family’s Inwood address and Miranda’s elite education. While visitors to the neighborhood would not have known where the Heights ended and the comparatively more affluent Inwood neighborhood began, residents were cognizant of the Washington Heights/Inwood border. Moreover, unlike other kids in the barrio, Miranda attended Hunter College School (class of 1998), a public school for gifted children located on the Upper East Side, from elementary school through high school. He commuted between his barrio and school and most of Miranda’s friends were “white and Jewish,”¹¹ Although he had a few friends in Washington Heights, Miranda described growing up in social isolation: “[the other Latino kids] would chill on the corner, and I would see them when I took out the recycling on Fridays.”¹² Between school and home, growing up Miranda had to learn to exist in two social spheres that were different both demographically and socioeconomically.

This difficulty navigating between two distinct social spheres had an added complexity in Miranda’s Puerto Rican heritage. Growing up, Miranda and his sister spent summers with their grandparents and extended family in Vega Alta, Puerto Rico. He recalled fondly how, “[He was] welcomed every summer as a cherished member of the community, despite [his] halting Spanglish.”¹³ In Vega Alta, Miranda found a place where he belonged and was wholeheartedly accepted: “[I felt] a sense of community that often eluded me back in

10 Ibid.

11 Campbell Robertson, “You’re 27. Here are Millions to Stage Your Musical,” *The New York Times*, February 18, 2007, Section 2, Sunday edition, 9.

12 Melena Ryzik, “Heights before Broadway.” *The New York Times* (March 14, 2008), <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/14/theater/14heig.html> (Accessed December 1, 2016).

New York.”¹⁴ Although his Spanish was not fluent and he was known as “the son of Luisito, who left for New York”¹⁵, he felt welcome without judgment. Consequently, despite not having been born in Puerto Rico, the country became home to Miranda in a way that a city as diverse and divided as New York fell short.

It was at Wesleyan that Miranda ultimately formed a closer bond with the broader Latino community: “he moved into the Latino student house”¹⁶ (it was here, in “La Casa” that Miranda first began developing *In The Heights*).¹⁷ Then, during his freshman summer in 1999, Miranda had a job covering Washington Heights for his father’s newly founded bilingual community newspaper, Manhattan Times. This newspaper job “became a seminar course on the neighborhood and its residents”¹⁸ that deeply influenced Miranda’s writing. These two immersion opportunities provided Miranda with a deep understanding of and appreciation for the Latino community he had missed out on growing up. Discovering a “home” for himself amongst the Latino immigrant community, similar to the home he found in Vega Alta, was crucial for Miranda’s artistic development. His two successful works, *In The Heights* and *Hamilton*, both focused on immigrants finding their home in New York City. Based on his experiences with the Latino community in college

13 Lin-Manuel Miranda, “Lin-Manuel Miranda: Give Puerto Rico Its Chance to Thrive.” *The New York Times*, opinion pages (March 28, 2016), http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/28/opinion/lin-manuel-miranda-give-puerto-rico-its-chance-to-thrive.html?_r=0 (Accessed November 25, 2016).

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Robertson, “You’re 27. Here are Millions to Stage Your Musical,” 9.

17 Latina Staff. “Exclusive Q&A: In The Heights Creator & Star Lin-Manuel Miranda Talks to Latina.” *Latina* (February 22, 2008), <http://www.latina.com/lifestyle/money-career/exclusive-qa-iin-heightsi-creator-star-lin-manuel-miranda-talks-latinacom-abo> (Accessed December 1, 2016).

18 Robertson, “You’re 27. Here are Millions to Stage Your Musical,” 9.

and growing up, Miranda wrote his first draft of *In The Heights* during his sophomore year at Wesleyan over the winter of 1999.

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Miranda’s passion for theater came from his parents. (“The Mirandas could rarely afford to take their children to Broadway, but cast recordings were always available”¹⁹). His musical tastes were influenced by: Broadway show tunes, such as Camelot, which his parents played in the car; Spanish salsa music of family parties; and contemporary music popular with his peers: from his sister’s hip hop albums to his bus driver teaching him how to rap.²⁰ This broad exposure to musical genres complemented Miranda’s own natural flair for performance. Luis Miranda Jr. recounted the story of Miranda’s first piano recital: “people applauded, so he played a second song, and people applauded, and I remember his eyes popping up, and he said “I know another one.””²¹ Miranda continued to develop his love for theatre performing in numerous middle school and high school theatre productions. At Wesleyan, the theatre studies major also began to write his own songs and performances.²²

Miranda attributed his hardworking nature and determination to follow his dreams to his parents: “I [came] from a family of really hard workers [...] My parents worked the entire time we were growing up. That was sort of the ethic we had”²³. Before attending NYU, Luis had worked in “a very safe job as the manager of the biggest Sears in Puerto Rico [which he gave up] to go to New

19 Michael Paulson, “Lin-Manuel Miranda, Creator and Star of ‘Hamilton,’ Grew Up on Hip-Hop and Show Tunes,” *The New York Times* (August 12, 2015), http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/16/theater/lin-manuel-miranda-creator-and-star-of-hamilton-grew-up-on-hip-hop-and-show-tunes.html?_r=0 (Accessed November 25, 2016).

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Lorraine Murray, “Lin-Manuel Miranda,” *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Lin-Manuel-Miranda> (Accessed November 30, 2016).

York, where [he] didn't speak the language," to pursue his academic dreams.²⁴ It was this same drive and self-confidence that empowered Miranda to write a musical about his barrio or neighborhood, despite the lack of Latino plays on the Broadway stage. Throughout Miranda's amateur career in high school and at university, his family comprised a large contingent of the audience at performances. ("His sophomore year [at Wesleyan], he did 'West Side Story,' so [Luis] rented a bus and took everybody [they] knew in Washington Heights to see it"²⁵). His parents were supportive both during and post-Wesleyan in the evolution of *In The Heights* and the very first reading of *In The Heights* took place at the Miranda household on Lin-Manuel Miranda's twentieth birthday.²⁶

Miranda was both fortunate and astute to make and maintain connections in his industry both in high school and at Wesleyan: "As a high school student, he met Stephen Sondheim when the composer-lyricist spoke at Hunter; now Mr. Miranda sends him unfinished work for feedback."²⁷ This feeling of respect was mutual, and in 2000, Sondheim asked Miranda for help translating lyrics from *West Side Story* into Spanish for the musical's revival. He complimented Miranda for "[knowing where musical theatre [came] from, and [caring] about where it [came] from."²⁸ Beyond Miranda's innate talent, connections that he made through Wesleyan and friends were instrumental in the Broadway success of *In The Heights*. Miranda's original on campus

23 Ivette Manners, "Lin-Manuel Miranda's Family takes Center Stage." *New York Lifestyles Magazine* (May 2016). <http://www.newyorklifestylesmagazine.com/articles/linmanuel.html> (Accessed November 25, 2016).

24 Paterniti, "Lin-Manuel Miranda Is Ready."

25 Gonzales, "Family's Big Role with 'Hamilton'."

26 Robert Kahn, "A Bodacious Bodega," *News Day* (New York), February 4, 2007.

27 Paulson, "Lin-Manuel Miranda Grew Up on Hip-Hop and Show Tunes."

28 Rebecca Mead, "A Hip-Hop Hamilton," *The New Yorker* (February 9, 2015), <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/02/09/hamiltons> (accessed December 13, 2016).

production of *In The Heights* caught the attention of Wesleyan senior, John Mailer²⁹ (Class of 2000), who believed the play had potential for further development.

In 2001, Mailer formed a theatre company, Back House Productions, with fellow alumnus Thomas Kail (Class of 1999). Although Kail was an American history major, he directed several Wesleyan theatre productions. Mailer provided Kail with a script and recording of Miranda's Wesleyan *In The Heights* production and Kail agreed that the project had promise.³⁰ In the spring 2002, within weeks of graduating, Miranda met with Kail to discuss the possibility of working together with Kail serving as director on *In The Heights*. The meeting was successful and Kail arranged for *In The Heights* to begin being workshopped out of Black House Productions.

Producers quickly scooped up *In The Heights*. Producer Jill Furman attended the second workshop having been put in contact with Miranda by actor David Moscow, a childhood friend of Miranda whom she had worked with on the film *Endsville*. Kevin McCollum and Jeffery Seller, "the power hitters whose specialty is finding left-field hits like *Rent* (1996) and *Avenue Q* (2003)"³¹, soon joined Furman. McCollum and Seller increased significantly the production budget to \$2.5million and provided a venue: the producers were part owners of 37 Arts, a new Off-Broadway theatre looking for a show to put on.³² The three producers invested in the show, taking significant monetary risk on an untried actor and songwriter. However, they agreed that the "enthusiasm and talent involved with [*In The Heights*]"³³ made it worth the risk.

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29 Son of the famous novelist, Norman Mailer.

30 Paulson, "Lin-Manuel Miranda Grew Up on Hip-Hop and Show Tunes."

31 Robertson, "You're 27. Here are Millions to Stage Your Musical," 9.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

In an interview with Time Out New York, Miranda referred to *In The Heights* as the “brown people of Broadway”³⁴ show because it told the under-represented story of Latino immigrants.³⁵ Growing up Miranda “got used to seeing the family’s neighborhood depicted negatively on TV and films. There were drug deals and knife fights, but nobody transmitted the beauty, passion or hard work that happened there.”³⁶ Miranda wanted to write a play about his neighborhood (as writer Una LaMarche described it, “a freestyling salsa – and hip-hop-filled love letter to his neighborhood, his heritage”³⁷), a play that “[showed] Latinos in the everyday mode [he was] used to, and not just in gangs.”³⁸ *In The Heights* was a *Carnaval del Barrio* or a jubilant celebration of Miranda’s neighborhood.

Miranda explained, “I wrote the show I wanted to be in. I grew up with hip-hop, and I wanted it to sound like my neighborhood.”³⁹ Like most Latino actors, Miranda was frustrated by the continual casting of white actors in Latino roles, or having to play “stereotypical gang members or servants.”⁴⁰ *In The Heights* provided “mainstream” character roles for Latino actors: like their white counterparts on the Broadway stage, Latinos were vivacious three-dimensional characters who went to work, had dreams, and lived ordinary lives.⁴¹ The songs that Miranda wrote for *In The Heights*

34 Allison Williams, “The Hot Seat,” *TimeOut* (New York), June 5-11, 2008, 168.

35 Mark Blankenship, “No Fear of Heights,” *Variety* (New York), February 12, 2007, 55.

36 Christopher Moore, “Successfully Celebrating the ‘Heights,’” *West Side Spirit* (New York), January 18, 2007, 20.

37 Una LaMarche, “Spotlight: Lights Up on Washington Heights!” *BlackBook Magazine* (New York), February 20, 2008, 34.

38 Blankenship, “No Fear of Heights,” 55.

39 Mervyn Rothstein, “No Place Like Home.” *In The Heights’ Playbill* (March 9, 2008), 10.

40 Blankenship, “No Fear of Heights,” 55.

reflected his experience growing up in Washington Heights/Inwood. In addition to hip-hop, Latin beats were a large part of the score as they captured the atmosphere of this New York City *barrio*. Miranda observed: “I’ve never heard salsa music used to tell a story onstage, even though it’s incredibly dramatic.”⁴²

In his New York Sun review of *In The Heights* when it opened Off Broadway in February 2007, Eric Grode wrote: “gone are the days when immigrants [...] and sons of immigrants [...] felt the need to yank up their roots and create musical images of an America completely divorced from their own backgrounds.”⁴³ With the increasing diversification of the “Great White Way”, through musicals such as *Hair*, *Miss Saigon*, and *The Color Purple*, a space had been created for Miranda to bring the story of his people and his neighborhood to the stage. Miranda’s effort received high praise for its rewriting of the Latino character on the Broadway stage, its celebration of Latino culture and its youthful vitality. One critic summed up the buzz surrounding Miranda and *In The Heights* when he wrote; “It has been many years since we’ve had a musical this colorful and culturally diverse.”⁴⁴

Although the play drew comparisons to *West Side Story* from reviewers, it was *Rent* and *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964) that inspired Miranda to write *In The Heights*. Miranda watched *Rent* as a teen and the play had a lasting impact on him. *Rent*’s contemporary setting engaged Miranda and introduced to him the possibility of writing a play about his life in the ‘Heights’. *Fiddler on the Roof* played a far more direct role in the creation of *In The Heights*. In the words of Miranda: “The real genetic forefather for *Heights* is *Fiddler on the Roof* [...] It was about a community coping with change and has change thrust upon it. We looked to

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 Eric Grode, “‘In The Heights’ but Not Out of the Woods,” *New York Sun*, February 12, 2007, 14.

44 Scott Harrah, “On Broadway, ‘In The Heights’ Musical Soars,” *The Villager* (New York), April 9, 2008, 11.

Fiddler for our structure. We [introduced] our types with the song 'In The Heights.' They introduced theirs with 'Tradition.'"⁴⁵ Miranda believed the themes of tradition and community in *Fiddler on the Roof* were relevant to the experience of the Latino community trying to make a home in northern Manhattan.

In 2008, after a successful run at 37 Arts, *In The Heights* moved to Broadway, officially opening on March 9th, 2008. It was noteworthy as Latinos wrote both its book and score and its cast was almost exclusively Latino. It was not, however, unique. Several shows on Broadway already featured casts that were almost all non-white or featured minority characters in traditionally white roles. *Passing Strange*, a "new rock musical with nothing but black actors"⁴⁶ which opened around the same time as *In The Heights*, touched on similar themes of identity and finding a community. As theatre critic, Mark Blankenship, pointed out, the challenge for these ethnically diverse productions was their ability to increase audience diversity without alienating traditional mainstream theatre goers. These plays would not be successful if they catered to their minority audience as ticket sales would be insufficient.⁴⁷

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Despite only achieving center stage in recent years, Latinos have had a long history on Broadway. The first professional Latino theatre troupe, La compañía del teatro español, was established in 1921. However, it was not until World War II that Latin America and Latinos were portrayed with any consistency on Broadway. To rally support for an American and Latin American alliance, Roosevelt endeavored to promote the image of Latinos in the popular mind: "One tactic employed to achieve this goal was to use popular entertainment as a propaganda tool. Producers were encouraged to cultivate Latin American

⁴⁵ Bozymowski, "In the Heights: Chasing Broadway Dreams."

⁴⁶ Mark Blankenship, "B'way Colors Outside the Lines," *Variety* (New York), January 28, 2008, 63.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

stars."⁴⁸ The goal was to provide Americans with a "safe" way to experience the Latino other by highlighting their exoticism on the stage. Latina actresses were "performers playing performers"⁴⁹ and the characters that they played fit the exotic and seductive stereotypes through nicknames such as "The Cuban Hurricane" or "The Puerto Rican Peppercorn."⁵⁰ Although recruited to perform on Broadway, these women received no credit for their performances in the playbills.⁵¹

The mid-twentieth century from the 1950s through to 1970 offered increased opportunities for Latinos on Broadway. In 1957, *West Side Story* was brought to Broadway, changing Latino theatre forever. Prior to *West Side Story*, musicals featuring Latinos were set in "a faraway land of soft breezes and the sounds of mariachi."⁵² *West Side Story* was the first musical involving Latino characters set in New York City and the score reflected the new setting. The storyline moved away from the fanciful plotlines of earlier Latino plays and instead focused on real life issues experienced by Latinos in New York. *West Side Story* was introduced at a time when there was "uncertainty among the U.S. cultural elite regarding how the new Puerto Rican arrivals in New York should be understood especially with regard to existing racial structures and stereotypes"⁵³ and had a huge impact in the creation of the Puerto Rican identity. The play has since been criticized for failing to represent Puerto Rican culture, its casting of non-Latinos in Latino roles, as well its misrepresentation of Puerto Rican culture, music, and dance.⁵⁴ *West Side Story* also created a harmful Latino stereotype: the machismo Latino gang member ("more than lovers on a

⁴⁸ Colleen L Rua, "Coming Home: US-Latinos on the Broadway Stage," (Medford: Tufts University, 2011), <http://search.proquest.com/docview/912022464?accountid=15172>. (Accessed November 23, 2016), 38.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 45.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 45.

⁵¹ Ibid, 40.

⁵² Ibid, 52.

⁵³ Brian Herrera, "How The Sharks Became Puerto Rican," in *Latin Numbers*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 102.

balcony or dancers on a rooftop, the handcuffed Puerto Rican boy Chino [emblemized] the racialized conclusions about Latino-ness⁵⁵). The only two Sharks characters with voices were Bernardo and Chino, two violent and unpredictable personalities. Their actions and punishments became typecast into future Latino roles on the stage.

In the latter part of the twentieth century, Latino activity on Broadway was summarized in five musicals of varying success. The hugely unsuccessful *Zoot Suit*, produced in 1979 by the bilingual theatre troupe, Teatro Campesino, was Broadway's first Latino musical. *A Chorus Line* (1976) and *Rent* were both "mainstream" Broadway plays that created roles for Latinos. These roles focused on the individual character without regard for their place in broader culture. However, neither play challenged Latino cultural stereotypes of earlier Broadway productions. *Capeman* (1998), a disastrous attempt to portray the life of convicted murderer and gang member Salvador Agrón, split stage time between New York City and Puerto Rico. Mainstream critics wrote harsh reviews of the play, which portrayed a one-dimensional Latino thug: a boy who would not have become a criminal if he had never left Puerto Rico. After *Capeman's* flop, there was an absence of Latino theatre on Broadway until *In The Heights* moved from Off-Broadway to Broadway a decade later.

For Miranda, *In The Heights* was an opportunity to correct the blanket stereotyping of Latinos as criminals in *Capeman* and *West Side Story* (according to Miranda, "they came forty years apart and they [were] both about Puerto Ricans as gang members"⁵⁶). Drugs, gangs, and violence were prevalent across Manhattan neighborhoods, but as a result of clichés enforced by musicals like these, the focus was on the criminal activity in

54 Rua, "Coming Home: US-Latinos on the Broadway Stage," 55.

55 Herrera, "How The Sharks Became Puerto Rican," 127.

56 Patrick Hinds, "Lin-Manuel Miranda's First Ever Interview," *Theater People Blog*, posted October 25, 2015, <http://www.theaterppl.com/blog/lin-manuel-mirandas-first-ever-interview/> (Accessed November 27, 2016).

predominantly minority neighborhoods. When Miranda wrote the play at Wesleyan for the student theatre, instead of writing about Latinos as outsiders in Manhattan, he wrote a love triangle involving outsiders within the Latino community: "people who [were] in [Washington Heights] but [were] not exactly of [Washington Heights]."⁵⁷ The members of the love triangle were outsiders for different reasons – education, race and sexual orientation.

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Miranda described the original version of *In The Heights* as a "Hispanic *Rent*"⁵⁸. A major theme of the play was "love and acceptance, particularly of gay people, in the Latino community."⁵⁹ In the initial years of workshopping, the plot revolved around the closeted Lincoln and his secret crush on his best friend, Benny. Miranda felt that Lincoln's story was an important in the context of outsiders finding acceptance within their neighborhood as, "there [was] a real stigma if you [were] gay in the Latino community and I [thought] that [was] a really interesting story for the community."⁶⁰ Lincoln's coming out in a community prejudiced against homosexuality was a far more important story in his mind than the tired plot of drug crime in the neighborhood. Unfortunately, McCollum and Seller had just produced a musical, *Avenue Q*, with the same plotline.

The producers hired Quiara Alegría Hudes as a book writer to help Miranda and Kail shift the focus of *In The Heights*. Hudes had impressed Furman as a graduate student in playwriting at Brown University. Like Miranda, Hudes grew up in a Latino neighborhood in Philadelphia as a first

57 Robertson, "You're 27. Here are Millions to Stage Your Musical," 9.

58 Hinds, "Lin-Manuel Miranda's First Ever Interview."

59 Patrick Hinds, "Episodes 1 & 2: In The Heights," interview for *Broadway Backstory* (audio blog), November 15, 2016, <https://www.todaytix.com/insider/nyc/posts/episodes-1-2-in-the-heights> (Accessed November 27, 2016).

60 Ibid.

generation Puerto Rican and attended Yale University as a music major. Furman admired the “elegance to her writing”⁶¹ and Hudes’ particular use of language that was “poetic yet always rooted in reality.”⁶² Miranda, Kail and Hudes transformed the plot from a love story with the community as a backdrop to a love story about an overlooked community. In 2005, the show was work-shopped at the Eugene O’Neill Theatre as part of a theatre development program for new artists. It was here that the character Lincoln was cut and many of his issues with community and family transferred to Nina, rendering her a more complex character in her interactions with her parents. There was a lot of Hudes in Nina as both women were first generation Puerto Rican college students, facing the demands of elite universities and trying to maintain ties to home.

This switch in focus from Lincoln to Nina altered the trajectory of the play. However, the move away from Lincoln’s storyline did not compromise Miranda’s original mission. Miranda aimed to dispel criminal stereotypes of Latinos by sharing the vibrant everyday life in these neighborhoods. He wanted to educate audiences about the broader social and economic issues confronting Latinos in these neighborhoods. It was clear from Miranda’s many interviews that he had not set out to write about issues specific to the LGBTQ community in the Latino neighborhood of Washington Heights. Moreover, Hudes’ contributions including her influence in developing Nina’s character did not dilute Miranda’s message. Miranda had sole responsibility for the score of *In The Heights* meaning that the messages in his songs were consistent with his original purpose.

Through these changes, the version of *In The Heights* staged in the Richard Rogers Theatre in 2008 was very different to the play Miranda debuted his sophomore year at Wesleyan. The Broadway version was set over the Fourth of July weekend. The protagonist and narrator became bodega owner Usnavi who dreamed of returning to

his parent’s home, the Dominican Republic. The role of Usnavi was one of the biggest changes between the two versions of *In The Heights*. It had never been Miranda’s intention to act in the play, but Miranda assumed the role owing to the complexity and pace of his raps. As McCollum commented during a workshop, “every time that guy opened his mouth in this version of *In The Heights* I wanted to know more.”⁶³ Other characters included: Graffiti Pete, the local vandal; Sonny, Usnavi’s socially-conscious sixteen-year-old cousin who helped him run the bodega; the neighborhood’s Abuela Claudia (modeled on the woman who had helped raise Miranda and still lived in his parents’ home) who immigrated from Cuba as a child in 1943 and held the winning lottery ticket; Kevin and Camilla Rosario, owners of a car service who used their life savings to send their daughter, Nina, to Stanford University; Nina, who has returned home after dropping out of Stanford and has begun a relationship with one her father’s drivers, Benny, the only non-Latino in the community, much to her father’s disapproval; Vanessa, Usnavi’s love interest who was desperate to escape the barrio and worked at the salon with Daniela and Carla, the neighborhood gossips who were forced to close shop and move to the Bronx owing to rising rent costs. The play followed these characters as they navigated issues of poverty, gentrification, interracial relations and other themes.

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When Miranda went to Wesleyan and experienced life outside of Washington Heights, he realized that his “neighborhood was like a little Latin American country on the top of Manhattan.”⁶⁴ That almost all of the characters in his musical were Latino was not a deliberate decision on Miranda’s part. It reflected the demographics of that community. Forty eight percent of residents were immigrants and the neighborhood had the highest concentration of Latinos in the Manhattan borough, with two thirds of the population from the Dominican Republic and “72% of the population self-[identifying] as Latino or Hispanic” in a survey

⁶³ Hinds, “Episodes 1 & 2: In The Heights.”

⁶⁴ Rothstein, “No Place Like Home,” 12.

⁶¹ Alexis Soloski, “Adventures of a Barrio Girl,” *Village Voice* (New York), January 31 – February 6, 2007, Arts section, 3.

⁶² Ibid.

conducted in 2013 for the Office of the State Comptroller's 2013 report.⁶⁵ Although there was a strong Dominican culture in Washington Heights, there was also a significant Puerto Rican population in the neighborhood. Miranda's decision to feature a mainly Latino cast was a faithful representation of the neighborhood in which he grew up.

There had been a mass influx of Latino immigrants into New York City and Washington Heights in the 1950s and 1960s. Prior to this influx, Washington Heights comprised middle-class Irish-Americans and Jews.⁶⁶ Although Washington Heights had been considered a middle-class neighborhood before World War II, the increasing presence of minorities (owing to the availability of low-rent housing) during the 1950s meant that the majority of the residents in Washington Heights were lower middle-class.⁶⁷ Over the last fifty years, a constant stream of Latino immigrants has rendered the neighborhood the heart of Puerto Rican and Dominican communities. A social survey conducted by Lee A. Lendt in 1957 revealed that: "The most notable facet of their relationship with the older ethnic groups in Washington Heights [was] the cultural isolation that [seemed] to separate them from the activities of the community."⁶⁸ The influx of multigenerational Latino families meant that Latino immigrants were able to build an exclusive Latino community in this removed area of Manhattan. As Miranda stated in an interview for the *New Yorker*: "[My barber] [didn't] know a word of English. Like everybody else up here. They [didn't] need to learn English."⁶⁹ The ability

⁶⁵ Thomas P. DiNapoli and Kenneth B. Bleiwas, "An Economic Snapshot of Washington Heights and Inwood," in *Office for the State Comptroller* (June 2015), <https://www.osc.state.ny.us/osdc/rpt2-2016.pdf> (Accessed October 01, 2016), 2.

⁶⁶ Lee A. Lendt, "Introduction," in *A social history of Washington Heights, New York City*. (New York: Columbia-Washington Heights Community Mental Health Project, 1960), 8.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, "Migration During the Twentieth Century," 66.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, "Present Groups in Washington Heights and their relations," 88.

⁶⁹ Ross, "The Boards: Local Boy," 64.

of Latinos to maintain their cultural traditions and language alleviated the need to assimilate into American culture and learn English.

The cohesive community that Miranda created on stage was not an entirely accurate portrayal of the Dominican and Puerto Rican relationship. Whilst low socioeconomic status tied Puerto Ricans and Dominicans together, this relationship was not always harmonious. Although Dominicans relied heavily on Puerto Ricans and their social institutions when they first arrived in New York,⁷⁰ there were also clear differences between their two countries that were racialized in this new environment. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s Dominicans tried to separate themselves from the Puerto Rican identity when establishing themselves in the city. This was an attempt to avoid the "culture of poverty"⁷¹ associated with Puerto Ricans. Puerto Ricans, on the other hand, viewed Dominicans as "physically darker, illegal, foreign, and criminal,"⁷² similar to African Americans, and sought to avoid the social prejudices of being mistaken for being black.⁷³ Miranda avoided this racial dynamic by softening these past conflicts and portraying all Latinos as getting along happily. By doing this, *In The Heights* became a play for all Latinos, not just a specific nationality.

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The set design for *In The Heights* accurately portrayed this exclusive Latino community in the Heights. The set captured the gritty cityscape ("the battered storefront signage, the stickers on doors, [the graffiti], the joyless streetlamp"⁷⁴), but was neutral enough to avoid upstaging the characters. Each of the four main "buildings" portrayed a significant part of the Latino experience in New York City. Abuela Claudia's house, with its front

⁷⁰ Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof, "Hispanic, Whatever That Means," in *A Tale of Two Cities: Santo Domingo and New York after 1950* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 115.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 117.

⁷² *Ibid*, 118.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 116.

door that was “busted up”⁷⁵ and the doorbell that “don’t work because so many people comes over to visit,”⁷⁶ signified the multigenerational nature of the community where Latinos of all backgrounds and ages came together to create a family. Daniela’s salon, which closed over the course of the play, represented Latino businesses forced to relocate further north owing to rising rents with gentrification of the neighborhood.

Usnavi’s bodega symbolized the Latin American countries that these immigrants had left behind. Bodega was a term used to describe a Spanish grocery store. In a neighborhood that is facing increasing encroachment from white gentrifiers, the unabashedly unchanged referral to the store as a bodega in the face of Americanization was a strong reminder of the home the characters left behind. Finally, the Rosario’s car service alluded to the immigrant experience and ethnic succession. The fact that Rosario’s storefront sign physically covered the old O’Hanrahans sign (the original owners of the car service) was symbolic of Latinos taking over the neighborhood from the white European immigrants and their efforts to create better lives for themselves in their new home.

Although Anna Louizos won a Tony for her set, not everyone was impressed with the design, seeing it as symptomatic of a deeper problem: “Although it [was] rendered with exacting, gritty verisimilitude,” New York Times critic, Charles Isherwood wrote, “this sun-drenched block of Washington Heights could almost [have been] mistaken for Main Street at Disneyland, or “Sesame Street” without the puppets.”⁷⁷ For these reviewers, the lack of “authentic despair, serious hardship or

74 Kenneth Jones, “Scenic Designer Anna Louizos Captured the Heights by Wandering Its Streets,” *Playbill* (May 27, 2008), <http://www.playbill.com/article/scenic-designer-anna-louizos-captured-the-heights-by-wandering-its-streets-com-150440> (Accessed December 1, 2016).

75 Hudes and Miranda, “Scene 8,” Act II, 131.

76 Ibid.

77 Charles Isherwood, “From the Corner Bodega, the Music of Everyday Life,” *The New York Times* (February 9, 2007), <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/09/theater/reviews/09heights.html> (Accessed November 24, 2016).

violence”⁷⁸ (“the scariest presence onstage [was] a graffiti artist, the worst damage a smashed store window”⁷⁹) detracted from the overall purpose of the play to convey everyday life in this minority community. The play ignored Washington Heights’ machismo reputation rooted in its Latino community and history of drugs, gangs, and violence stretching back to the 1980s, when crack cocaine use became widespread. A 2014 survey carried out by psychologist, Dr. Debora Upegui-Hernandez, reported that: “Dominican respondents were twice as likely as Columbians to report that the use and sale of drugs in their neighborhood were major problems while growing up.”⁸⁰ To his harshest critics, Miranda did a disservice to his community by glossing over deep-seated issues within Washington Heights. His presentation of an “idealized fairy-tale world”⁸¹, “like the real place, only friendlier,”⁸² a “whitewashed [and] distressingly Reaganesque [utopia]”⁸³ ironically served to gentrify the neighborhood and its residents.

Miranda responded that these critics continued to endorse the *West Side Story* cultural stereotype of Latinos as thugs: “There [were] drugs and crime in all neighborhoods. Washington Heights [wasn’t] as bad as people [thought].”⁸⁴ Statistics supported Miranda’s argument. According to a 2016 Office for State Comptroller report, within the Washington Heights and Inwood neighborhood, “serious crime in the area fell by 74

78 Ibid.

79 Michael Feingold, “Musicals in Transit.” *Village Voice*, February 21, 2007, 43.

80 Débora Upegui-Hernández, “Maintaining Transnational Relations,” in *Growing up transnational: Colombian and Dominican children of immigrants in New York City* (El Paso: LFB Scholarly Publishing LLC, 2014), 122.

81 David Rooney, “Tuner Offers a Fresh New Voice with a Latin Beat,” *Variety*, February 9, 2007, 52.

82 Sam Thielman, “It’s Mr. Rodgers’ Barrio in Song,” *Newsday*, February 9, 2007, B7.

83 Leonard Jacobs, “Miranda Rights,” *New York Press*, February 19, 2008, 22.

84 Hinds, “Episodes 1 & 2: In The Heights.”

percent between 1993 and 2013.”⁸⁵ The drop in crime was further substantiated in a crime & safety report compiled by the online news source DNAinfo.com in 2011⁸⁶ where Inwood and Washington Heights ranked 23rd and 24th respectively, out of 69, for safest neighborhoods to live in across all five boroughs of New York City. Traditionally white areas, such as Greenwich Village & Meatpacking District and Midtown ranked 68th and 69th respectively.⁸⁷ These statistics suggested that critics of *In The Heights* were forming judgments on how Washington Heights in 2008 should be portrayed based on cultural stereotypes divorced from reality.

In The Heights attempted to shift assumptions about Latinos as criminals. The first character to appear on stage was the “deviant” Graffiti Pete. Although he had the potential to be threatening, over the course of the play, the audience realized that he was a sensitive teenager. During the play’s climax when the blackout occurred, he helped Sonny defend the bodega from looters, and in the final scene, he created a beautiful mural of the deceased Abuela Claudia that he self-consciously presented to Usnavi. The looting itself was another attempt to dispel the stereotype of Latino thugs. There was no witness to the crime, and therefore, the identity of the perpetrator was unknown. As a result, “the characters on stage [were] freed from any culpability and the expected stereotype [and] as the looters [were] never identified, the audience [had] no evidence as to their ethnicity.”⁸⁸ This anonymity allowed for the focus to be on the victimization of the community and its healing process.⁸⁹

85 Thomas P. DiNapoli and Kenneth B. Bleiwas, “An Economic Snapshot of Washington Heights and Inwood,” 2.

86 “Crime and Safety Analysis Delivers Surprises Across the Five Boroughs,” *DNAinfo.com Crime & Safety Report* (September 7, 2011), <https://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/crime-safety-report/> (Accessed December 07, 2016).

87 Ibid.

88 Rua, “Coming Home: US-Latinos on the Broadway Stage,” 71.

89 Ibid.

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Miranda used *In The Heights* as a platform to raise what he believed to be the true problems affecting Latinos in Washington Heights. The most pressing issue the community faced was poverty. In Washington Heights, the average income of more than 25% of households was below the federal poverty level, which was significantly higher than the citywide percentage of 18%⁹⁰. This poverty was racially driven, both between Latinos and other races, and within the Latino community. For her study on first generation Colombians and Dominicans in New York City, Dr. Upegui-Hernandez cited a study carried out in 2010 that showed Latinos had the “lowest median household income [...] compared to Blacks, Whites, and Asians.”⁹¹ Dominicans and Puerto Ricans, the two main ethnicities represented *In The Heights*, tended to live alongside African Americans in “neighborhoods characterized by socio-economic disinvestment”⁹² owing to their low status within the Latin American community. This low status came from their perceived “lower incomes and darker skin-tones”⁹³ compared to other Latin American immigrants.

All of the characters in *In The Heights* were deeply affected by poverty. The characters’ motivations, actions and conversations revolved around money and the lack of it in the community. Usnavi found himself “getting tested [as] times are tough on [his] bodega.”⁹⁴ Camilla and Kevin Rosario operated their business and personal life on a tight budget to be able to finance Nina’s education. Ironically, by allocating all their money to Nina’s education, they were “behind on all [their] payments”⁹⁵ and in need of “an emergency loan,”⁹⁶ putting the business’s future at risk. Nina’s reason

90 Thomas P. DiNapoli and Kenneth B. Bleiwas, “An Economic Snapshot of Washington Heights and Inwood,” 2.

91 Upegui-Hernández, “Encountering Social Structures,” 161-162.

92 Ibid, 166.

93 Ibid.

94 Hudes and Miranda “In The Heights,” Act I, 3.

for dropping out of Stanford was that she “couldn’t work two jobs and study for finals and finish [her] term papers”⁹⁷; money, not intellectual acumen was responsible for her failure. Vanessa, stuck in a job that “doesn’t pay [her] what [she] wants to be making,”⁹⁸ was not able to afford to move out of the barrio and was stuck living in an apartment that frequently lost power as her mother spent the rent money on alcohol.

In the play’s opening number, “In The Heights”, Usnavi related the daily struggles of a community living in poverty in punchy verses. Despite his good humor and jovial interactions with customers, he informed the audience that “practically everybody’s stressed, yes, but they press through the mess bounce checks and wonder, “what’s next?””⁹⁹ Financial insecurity left the residents of Washington Heights in a perpetual state of uncertainty making it difficult to plan ahead. At the same time, however, there was an overarching ambition to move beyond the cycle of “fights and endless debts and bills [they had] to pay.”¹⁰⁰ As they endured their daily routines, the characters held onto their dreams and aspired to move “from poverty to stock options.”¹⁰¹ Throughout the song, characters passed through the bodega buying “light and sweet” café and lottery tickets. In a community trapped in poverty, the lottery ticket gave them reason to have faith and hope for the future.

If “In The Heights” communicated daily struggles associated with poverty, the song “96, 000” was an ode to money revealing what different characters would have done with \$96,000. Benny would have used the money to put himself through business school to advance his career (“no breakin’

your neck for respect or a paycheck”¹⁰²). Daniela would have reopened her salon in an “Atlantic city with a Malibu breeze.”¹⁰³ Vanessa would have moved into a studio downtown. Advancement was the common thread that tied all of these dreams together. Each of their dreams involved disassociating themselves from Washington Heights. Sonny was the only one to commit his money to improving the barrio. He sought to “Invest in protest!”¹⁰⁴ and to draw attention to the myriad of issues that he and his peers struggled with growing up in a minority neighborhood. The Heights was home for Sonny and he simply wanted to raise the standard of living.

Gentrification was looming as an issue in Washington Heights. As Usnavi narrated in his opening rap, “two months ago somebody bought Ortega’s./ Our neighbors started packin’ up and pickin’ up/ and ever since the rents went up/ it’s gotten mad expensive.”¹⁰⁵ Everyone in the community was affected by gentrification; however, some were more directly affected than others. Daniela and Carla “from the salon” were forced to relocate further north (“They keep raising the rent, what can I do?”¹⁰⁶) The salon’s fate symbolized the impending reality for many small Latino businesses to close shop or relocate. As Vanessa remarked: Daniela and Carla were “getting out of the barrio, and headin’ to the hood.”¹⁰⁷ Miranda left it to the characters to express the consequences of gentrification through their sorrow. Instead of being explicitly lectured on the costs of gentrification, the audience shared in Daniela and Carla’s grief as they exited their shop for the last time.

Other examples of gentrification in the neighborhood were subtle with people responding in different ways. The Piragua vendor struggled to

95 Ibid, “Scene 3,” 21.

96 Ibid.

97 Ibid, “Scene 5,” 36.

98 Ibid, “Scene 5,” 32.

99 Ibid.

100 Ibid.

101 Ibid.

102 Ibid, “96, 000,” 50

103 Ibid.

104 Ibid, 51

105 Ibid, “In The Heights,” 3.

106 Ibid, “Scene 6,” 40.

107 Ibid.

keep his business open in the face of competition from encroaching franchise Mr Softee: “Mr. Softee [was] trying to shut me down. But I’ll keep scraping by the fading light.”¹⁰⁸ Although the Piragua vendor won that battle (“Mister Softee’s truck has broken down. And here come all his customers my way. I told you, I run this town!”¹⁰⁹), the audience was left with the sense that it was only a matter of time. The Rosarios succumbed selling their precious car service to the anonymous Uptown Investment Group to pay their daughter’s university tuition. The unspoken hope here was that through their sacrifice their daughter might one day join the gentrifying class. Instead of tackling the topic directly, Miranda wove it into the lives of his characters making it an issue that was painfully present, without assigning it a name.

Despite these hardships, residents of Washington Heights retained a relatively positive outlook. Media and cultural studies professor at Northeastern University, Dr. Murray Forman, commented on this paradox that occurred in ghettos:

“the urban spaces most reviled by the mainstream and elite social segments [were] the lived spaces where acts of atrocity and conditions of desolation and desperation [were] often matched by more promising conditions seeped in optimism, charity, and creativity. The latter, of course, frequently [went] unnoticed and thus [remained] underreported in the social-mainstream.”¹¹⁰

Usnavi expressed this paradox clearly: “my parents came with nothing and they got a little more, and sure we’re poor but at least we got the store.”¹¹¹ This ability to maintain perspective and view situations in a positive light was communicated in this line and in the chorus of “In The Heights”. The

108 Ibid, “Scene 10,” 72.

109 Ibid, “Scene 10,” Act II, 137.

110 Forman, Murray Forman, “Space Matters: Hip-Hop and the Spatial Perspective,” in *The 'hood comes first: race, space, and place in rap and hip-hop* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), 8.

111 Ibid, 12.

repetitive refrain of “but we live with just enough”¹¹² and “time’s are tough, but even so”¹¹³ moved the song away from being a complaint about the conditions in which they live to a celebration of their community.

The community on stage was not only positive, but it was also generous and caring. As reviewer, Linda Armstrong, observed:

“Watching the musical, you will laugh, cry and feel proud of these characters who clearly represent the common man. Despite their struggles they manage to stay a tightly knit community that looks out for each member.”¹¹⁴

The Rosario’s opened their door to friends (“Usnavi come over for dinner, there’s plenty to eat”¹¹⁵). Daniela helped Vanessa achieve her dream of moving downtown (“A little birdie told me you needed a credit reference. [...] I’ll cosign on the apartment. But you have to invite me for a housewarming cocktail.”¹¹⁶). The community was as proud as the Rosario’s when Nina was admitted to Stanford (“We want front-row seats to your graduation –” “They’ll call your name –” And we’ll scream and shout”¹¹⁷). The community supported one another in good and bad times. In the humorous words of Sonny: “One day you’ll both need my sympathy and will I be there? Probably.”¹¹⁸

This tight knit community on stage was built around one woman who embodied the traits of positivity and generosity through her favorite expression: *paciencia y fe*. Although not related by blood to anyone on the street, Abuela Claudia

112 Hudes and Miranda “In The Heights,” Act I, 4.

113 Ibid, 8.

114 Linda Armstrong, “In The Heights Soars,” *N.Y. Amsterdam News*, February 22, 2007, 25.

115 Hudes and Miranda “In The Heights,” Act I, 5.

116 Ibid, “Scene 9,” Act II, 135-136.

117 Ibid, “No Me Diga,” Act I, 44.

118 Ibid. “Scene 9,” 65.

served as a grandmother to the entire community (“she’s not really my “Abuela,”/ but she practically raised me, this corner is her escuela!”¹¹⁹) supporting residents emotionally, physically and even financially when she won the lottery. Her death reverberated around the neighborhood leaving everyone in mourning. Nina best articulated this grief in “Everything I Know”: “She saved everything we gave her,/ Every little scrap of paper./ And our lives are in these boxes/ While the woman who held us is gone.”¹²⁰ Without Abuela Claudia, the Heights community needed to learn to rally together and keep her legacy and their culture alive by passing on stories of their homes.

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Some critics dismissed the plot of *In The Heights* as lacking substance or failing to “accrue much emotional tension or dramatic momentum”¹²¹ through plots that were resolved too easily. These critics missed Miranda’s intention to use *In The Heights* as a medium not to resolve issues but rather to showcase how Latino immigrants coped with and adapted to challenges they confronted. The struggle to establish oneself in a new country was captured in Abuela Claudia’s solo “Paciencia y Fe” which questioned whether life was better for immigrants in America. Abuela recounted her difficulty adapting to New York life: “Sharing double beds, trying to catch a break, struggling with/ English.”¹²² Aggressive and condescending comments to which she was subjected over the years were interjected throughout the song: “You better clean this mess” “You better learn ingles” “You better not be late/ You better pull your weight!”¹²³ Kevin Rosario addressed similar themes of feeling powerless in his solo “Inútil.” Faced with the prospect that “all [his] work, all [his] life/ Everything [he’s] sacrificed will have been

useless,”¹²⁴ he was forced to reflect on the fact that he came to America to create a better life for his family, yet had ended up in the same position as his father.

When Daniela called for a Carnival del Barrio, Vanessa and Sonny resisted arguing that there was nothing to celebrate: “The neighborhood is gone!/ They selling the dispatch, they/ Closing the salon [...] we are powerless, we are powerless!”¹²⁵ Their frustration with their lack of power as Latinos trapped by poverty on “Gilligan’s Ghetto Island,”¹²⁶ reflected the struggle of immigrants like Abuela, Claudia and Kevin who had come to the Heights to build a better life in a country that marginalized them. While Usnavi acknowledged their argument (“Maybe you’re right, Sonny. Call in the coroners!/ Maybe we’re powerless, a corner full of foreigners.”¹²⁷), he also reminded them how being immigrants had made them resilient to change: “There’s nothing going on here that we can’t handle [...] You could cry with your head in the sand./ I’m a-flying this flag that I got in my hand!”¹²⁸ Change was inevitable; however, as immigrants and first generation Latinos they had already lived through the biggest challenge.

In The Heights “[hammered] home a complicated nostalgia for a place where life was so hard that they, or their parents, had to leave.”¹²⁹ The characters had roots across regions of Latin America, from Cuba to the Dominican Republic to Puerto Rico. In Washington Heights, they formed their own Latino community that was both reminiscent of and distinct from the separate Latin American countries from which they hailed, though home was never far from their mind. The ditty that they sang during the Carnival del Barrio highlighted this “complicated nostalgia”. Sung in

119 Ibid. “In The Heights,” 3.

120 Ibid. “Scene 8,” Act II, 133

121 Isherwood, “From the Corner Bodega, the Music of Everyday Life.”

122 Hudes and Miranda, “Paciencia y Fe,” Act I, 63.

123 Ibid.

124 Ibid, “Inútil,” 38.

125 Ibid, “Carnaval Del Barrio,” Act II, 123.

126 Ibid, “Scene 5,” 115.

127 Ibid, “Carnaval del Barrio,” 124.

128 Ibid.

129 Thielman, “It’s Mr. Rodgers’ Barrio in Song,” B7.

Spanish, the song celebrated the flags of the Latin American countries represented in the barrio, calling for them to be raised (“Alza la bandera/ La bandera Dominicana”¹³⁰ *Raise the flag/ The Dominican flag*). The final verse, “Me acuerdo de me tierra!/ Esa bonita bandera!/ Contiene mi alma entera!/ Y cuando yo me muera,/ Entiérrame en mi tierra!” (*I remember my land/ that beautiful flag/ has my entire soul/ And when I die/ bury me in my land.*) highlighted the deep love that these Latino immigrants felt for places they might not return to, yet held onto dearly.

As the “Carnaval Del Barrio” was beginning to take off in the street, Carla took center stage to humorously express the geographical complexity of her status as a first generation Latino: “My mom is Dominican-Cuban, my dad is from Chile and P.R., which means:/ I’m Chile-Domini-CuRican, but I always say I’m from Queens!”¹³¹ A huge theme of *In The Heights* was the concept of home and identifying home when you were born in one place and embrace the culture of another. Growing up in America as a first or second generation Latino was complex. The constant reminder of their heritage, combined with fast paced American culture, left first generation Latinos with the “experience of juggling different cultural norms, values, and expectations, that of their parents and of the mainstream society they live in.”¹³² Walking a tight line between two or more different cultures, and therefore, two different identities begged the question of belonging. As Miranda articulated: “Am I supposed to be here, am I supposed to be there, and if I’m supposed to be here am I really Puerto Rican?”¹³³

Miranda’s questions about who he was and where he belonged and his concerns about his

130 Hudes and Miranda “Carnaval Del Barrio,” Act II, 121.

131 Ibid, 118.

132 Upegui-Hernández, “Negotiating Self and Identity as a Child of Immigrants,” 69.

133 Josh Helmin, “An Interview With Lin-Manuel Miranda,” *Towleroad* (March 7, 2007), http://www.towleroad.com/2007/03/towleroad_exclu/ (Accessed November 25, 2016).

Puerto Rican identity were reflected in Nina (“When I was younger, I’d imagine what would happen/ if my parents had stayed in Puerto Rico./ Who would I be if I had never seen Manhattan,/ if I lived in Puerto Rico with my People[?]”¹³⁴). Nina had always walked along a clear path; her reputation as the girl who “made it out [...] the first to go to college”¹³⁵ preceded her in the Heights, with her community placing pressure upon her to succeed for them. Returning home after having lost her way, she was forced to reevaluate her place within her community. Her anguish was clear when she opened up to Benny about her experience at Stanford: “I feel like all my life I’ve tried to find the answer [...] I thought I might find the answers out at Stanford./ But I’d stare out at the sea/ Thinking, where’m I supposed to be?”¹³⁶ Like Miranda as a child, Nina was in the unique position of straddling not only two countries, but also two social spheres: the lower socio-economic neighborhood from which she hailed, and the prestigious university she spent her life working to attend.

Usnavi was a character torn between the old and the new. While Nina’s parents raised her to advance in American society, Abuela Claudia raised Usnavi on “hundreds of stories/ about home.”¹³⁷ Having lost his parents as a child, Usnavi’s desire to return to the Dominican Republic was in part motivated by a desire to reconnect with them through their culture and their love for the home they left behind. It was only once his dream of returning “home” was in hand that he realized where he truly belonged was in Washington Heights. Graffiti Pete’s mural of Abuela Claudia inspired him to assume her mantle of keeping the memory of home alive through stories (“I illuminate the stories of the people in the street”¹³⁸); however, for Usnavi, home was the barrio, the memory of which he must preserve in the face of

134 Ibid, “When You’re Home,” 70.

135 Hudes and Miranda, “Breathe,” Act I, 19.

136 Ibid, “When You’re Home,” 70.

137 Ibid, “Hundreds of Stories,” Act II, 106.

138 Ibid, “Finale,” 151.

gentrification: “In five years, when this whole city’s rich folks and hipsters, who’s gonna miss this raggedy little business?”¹³⁹

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One of the biggest attractions of *In The Heights* was its unusual sound: “It [didn’t] sound like the half-assed pseudo-pop that [cluttered] up Broadway: Miranda’s score [was] rich and kaleidoscopic”¹⁴⁰. His lyrics packed a powerful emotional punch, drawing the audience into the world that the characters inhabited with vivid language. In the words of the critic for New York Theater magazine: “you’ll have to trust me that when Abuela Claudia sings about the open Cuban sky, or Vanessa describes the train rumbling by her apartment, or Nina remembers feeling that she lived at the top of the world when the world was just a subway map, the images stick with you.”¹⁴¹ Miranda’s evocative language was backed by a powerful score. His decision to use the sounds around him growing up to tell the story of his neighborhood and community was crucial to understanding the message of his play. As Broadway has traditionally been a “white space”, its musical style accordingly reflected its lack of cultural diversity, making it an ineffective vehicle to recreate the experiences of minorities on the stage.

While exclusively Latino music, such as merengue, salsa and bolero was important for telling a Latino story, rap and hip-hop were integral for telling the story of minority immigrants in a poor barrio such as Washington Heights. Through rap and hip-hop, disempowered Latino and African American youth were able to regain control of and draw attention to their plight. Although typically silenced by white society, this music created a platform for “examination and critique of the distribution of power and authority in the urban context.”¹⁴² The soundtrack of *In The Heights* was

139 Ibid, 150.

140 Jeremy McCarter, “Something’s Coming,” *New York Magazine*, February 26, 2007, Theater section, 126.

141 Ibid.

142 Forman, “Introduction,” xviii.

engaging as it invoked the passion that this marginalized community felt toward the space they inhabited. In his rap in “96,000”, Sonny skillfully narrated the difficulties his community faced living in the barrio. He briefly and powerfully touched on inequality in housing; the “kids [...] living without a good education”¹⁴³; how “the rent is escalatin”¹⁴⁴ and “the rich are penetratin”¹⁴⁵ thanks to gentrification; and the discrimination and racism that minorities face (“racism in this nation’s gone from latent to blatant!”¹⁴⁶). The use of rap as a vehicle to express the difficulties that the community faced was much more effective and memorable than writing the problems into dialogue between the characters.

Although the characters in *In The Heights* rap, Miranda made it clear that they were not in gangs. This was a source of relief for many of the actors involved with the production. As Robin de Jesús stated in the PBS documentary on *In The Heights*: “Finally a role where I [did] not have to carry a gun, I [was] not in a gang, I [was] not selling drugs. I [was] just a normal human being who [happened] to be Hispanic and who [happened] to live in this wonderful place called Washington Heights.”¹⁴⁷ The lives of the characters on stage often reflected the lives of the actors themselves and their experiences growing up in America with immigrant parents. Mandy Gonzalez, who played Nina Rosario, acknowledged parts of her life being played out on the stage; similar to Usnavi, Gonzalez was primarily raised by her grandma, as her parents worked long hours as factory workers.¹⁴⁸ Reflecting on his cast, Miranda summarized: “A lot of people in the company [were] first generation stateside and it [was] an incredible thing to be through our work carrying the

143 Hudes and Miranda, “96,000,” Act I, 51.

144 Ibid.

145 Ibid, 52.

146 Ibid.

147 Bozymowski, “In the Heights: Chasing Broadway Dreams.”

148 Ibid.

legacy of our parents.”¹⁴⁹ Through *In The Heights*, the actors were able to take control of Miranda’s earlier question as to what traditions Latinos keep, pass on to their children, and thus, keep alive.

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When receiving the Tony for Best Score, Miranda “[pulled] a small Puerto Rican flag from his pocket and dedicated the award to the homeland of his parents and relatives.”¹⁵⁰ This gesture was well received by the Puerto Rican community who saw Miranda as a source of pride for his efforts to undo the negative perceptions of Latino immigrants. Five months after this, Miranda continued to make history when *In The Heights* became the first ever Actor’s Equity production to tour in Puerto Rico. Not even *West Side Story* had toured the nation from which the Sharks gang immigrated. The reason likely stemmed from the fact that the casting of Puerto Ricans as the Jets rival gang appears to have been an “expeditious afterthought,”¹⁵¹ as the role of their nationality in the play was to provide plot’s tension, not to advance understanding of the culture of Puerto Rico. The arrival of *In The Heights* in San Juan boosted the morale of the community, owing to its loving portrayal of their people. *In The Heights* was well received by the Washington Heights community as well. It was seen as a source of self-esteem for many (“I’m proud [...] It’s my neighborhood”¹⁵²) who were used to seeing their community portrayed in a stereotypical and negative light.

Objectively, *In The Heights* was a huge success. In the words of Olga Merediz (Abuela Claudia): “the show made its mark on Broadway history.”¹⁵³ Two months after opening on Broadway, the play was nominated for thirteen Tony awards and it won four including best

149 Ibid.

150 Patrick Healy, “*In The Heights* Creator Heading to Puerto Rico.” *New York Times*, November 26, 2010, C2.

151 Herrera, “How The Sharks Became Puerto Rican,” 98.

152 Melissa Grace and Larry McShane, “Soaring Heights,” *New York Daily News*, May 14, 2008, 3.

orchestrations, best choreography, best original score and best musical. That was the most nominations and awards won by any Latino show in Broadway history. Additionally, by January 2009, the musical “recouped the initial \$10 million investment since the show opened on Broadway [...] and set a financial record for the show and the theater [...] for the week ending Jan 4.”¹⁵⁴ However, more important to Miranda than the accolades was the possibility that “[some] little white kid is gonna know what a Puerto Rican flag is!”¹⁵⁵ Miranda’s success in the industry was huge for the Latino community as it put their culture on stage in an attractive light and opened the door for further education on their history.

In The Heights leaves its audience with a rich sense of what it meant to be a Latino living in Washington Heights. The joy of life, family and community served as a buffer against the cold reality of discrimination and encroachment in one of the wealthiest cities in the world. While the Latino experience was filled with negative influences, *In The Heights* showed that their lives were not too different from the lives of its audience. The community seemed to thrive despite, or perhaps because of, the reality of their daily existence. It was through this positive portrayal of life in Washington Heights that Miranda was able to begin to heal some of the damage to the Latino community’s reputation inflicted by *West Side Story* and *Capeman*. In the world of Broadway, *In The Heights* offered Latino actors the precious and rare opportunity to play a role other than the “violent gang member”. Those who criticized the play for not portraying the harsher reality of Washington Heights misunderstood it. *In The Heights*’s purpose was not to reinforce white beliefs about

153 Raul A Reyes, “Latinos Succeed on the Great White Way,” *NBC News* (January 8, 2016), <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/broadway-latinos-succeed-great-white-way-n475546> (Accessed November 28, 2016).

154 David Itzkoff, “*In The Heights* Recoups It’s Initial Investment,” *New York Times*, January 9, 2009, C5.

155 Kenneth Jones, “Carnaval del Broadway: *In The Heights* Wows Audience at Final Performance,” *Playbill.com*, January 10th 2011.

immigrants; instead, it offered, with exuberance, a glimpse of the bittersweet life enjoyed by Latino Americans living at the top of the subway map.

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