

“I’ve never been North of 96th street”

**The dismantling of cultural stereotypes and the
celebration of Latinx-American culture in Miranda
and Hudes’**

“In the Heights”

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April 10th, 2020

Audiences and writers of Broadway musicals are historically predominantly white.¹ In the 2008 Broadway season for example, 82% of all writers of musicals², and 74% of all audience members³ were white. However, 2008 also saw the premiere of Lin Manuel Miranda and Quiara Alegria Hudes's *In the Heights*, the first successful musical about the Latinx⁴ experience with Latinx authors.⁵ Prior to *In the Heights*, Broadway's most notable Latinx musical was 1957's *West Side Story*, written by an entirely white team⁶, with all of its Latinx characters being either gang members or victims.⁷ Two decades later, when the crack cocaine epidemic hit New York, the predominantly Latinx neighborhood of Washington Heights became the city's epicenter for drug related crime,⁸ and the stereotype of Latinx people as drug dealers and gang members became even more solidified.⁹

In the Heights challenged this narrative. In balancing the dismantling of the stereotype of Latinx criminality through a focus on commonality, with a celebration of pride of Latinx cultural individuality, Miranda and Hudes created a piece that both educated a white audience about their culture, and portrayed their similarities to traditional Broadway musical theatre goers.

The dismantling of stereotypes begins in the opening number entitled *In The Heights*. After introducing himself and his heritage, Usnavi, our narrator, addresses the audience's unfamiliarity with the neighborhood saying "You're prob'ly thinkin: "I'm up shit's creek! /I've never been

¹ Internet Broadway Database

² Ibid

³ Broadway League Audience Report

⁴ A person of Latin American origin or descent, used as a gender-neutral alternative to Latino/Latina

⁵ Cázares, "Resisting Gentrification in Quiara Alegria Hudes and Lin-Manuel Miranda's *In the Heights* and Ernesto Quiñonez's *Bodega Dreams*." 2017

⁶ Internet Broadway Database

⁷ Sáez, *Blackout on Broadway*, 2018

⁸ Cázares, "Resisting Gentrification in Quiara Alegria Hudes and Lin-Manuel Miranda's *In the Heights* and Ernesto Quiñonez's *Bodega Dreams*."

⁹ Sáez, *Blackout on Broadway*

North of 96th street”¹⁰. This opening number in the play speaks directly to its audience, acknowledging their discomfort in their unfamiliarity with the subject matter, and meeting them with humor and understanding. As the song progresses, we are introduced to the various characters that make up the neighborhood, the Rosarios who own the cab company where Benny works and whose daughter Nina is studying at Stanford, Daniela and Carla who run the salon, Usnavi’s love interest Vanessa who is saving up for an apartment on the West Side and his younger cousin Sonny, who helps him run the bodega.¹¹ As Usnavi explains “everybody’s got a job/everybody’s got a dream.”¹²

Significantly, nearly all the characters are small business owners. The residents of this Washington Heights enclave are not gang members and drug dealers, but legitimate business owners and hardworking employees buying into the promise of the American Dream. Each character is working towards “the day [they] go from poverty to stock options”.¹³ This desire of lower-middle class entrepreneurs who work to rise above their social standing is a quintessential part of the immigrant story in “settler societies”, yet one that is not specific to any individual cultural group.¹⁴ The desires Kevin Rosario expresses to ensure his family has “everything they need”¹⁵ to prevent his “work”¹⁶, “life”¹⁷ and “sacrifice[es]”¹⁸ from being “useless”¹⁹ are universally immigrant, making them feel relatable, whether the audience member’s grandparents originated in Ireland, Italy or Cuba. In focusing on these universal struggles, Miranda and Hudes

¹⁰ In *The Heights* Original Broadway Cast Recording, 2008

¹¹ Hudes et al. In *the Heights: the Complete Book and Lyrics of the Broadway Musical*, 2013.

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Dauvergne, *The New Politics of Immigration and the End of Settler Societies*, 2017.

¹⁵ In *the Heights* Original Broadway Cast Recording

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

are showing their audience how they all “came to work and to live and [have] a lot in common”.²⁰

However, not all of *In the Heights* characters are gainfully employed. Graffiti Pete is introduced as he is tagging Usnavi’s bodega, and Usnavi describes him as “this punk I gotta chase away”²¹. The audience associates his character with the stereotypical ideas of Latinx criminality the Washington Heights neighborhood has become known for. Later in the show he is seen making a suspicious back alley deal with Sonny, but the details are not heard.²² The preconceived ideas of Latinx criminality cause the audience to presume that Graffiti Pete is dealing in illicit business.²³ However, it is later revealed that Sonny had commissioned Graffiti Pete to create a community memorial mural for the late Abuela Claudia, turning the stereotype on its head.²⁴ In this way Graffiti Pete represents this dismantling of the stereotype of Latinx criminality, showing that the audience’s preconceived ideas surrounding Latinx communities are just that, ideas.²⁵

Graffiti Pete is not the only window into the more dangerous side of Washington Heights the musical portrays. The final number of the first act, *Blackout* is a panic fueled chaos as a neighborhood wide power outage has the community scrambling to protect their businesses and loved ones from looting and vandalism.²⁶ Interestingly though, this violence is only spoken of, and not shown, while the characters feel a looming threat of “people lookin’ and shootin’”²⁷ and wanting to “see a robbery”²⁸, the song ends, not with an act of violence, but with Nina and

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ In The Heights Original Broadway Cast Recording

²² Hudes et al. In the Heights: the Complete Book and Lyrics of the Broadway Musical

²³ Sáez, *Blackout on Broadway*

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Hudes et al. In the Heights: the Complete Book and Lyrics of the Broadway Musical

²⁷ In the Heights Original Broadway Cast Recording

²⁸ Ibid

Benny kissing under the light of the fireworks²⁹. In this way Miranda and Hudes are reminding the audience that while crime is a reality in Washington Heights, it does not define the stories of the neighborhood's residents.

Through the combination of portraying its principal characters in alignment with universally immigrant experiences, and representing the disenfranchised criminal struggles of the neighborhood as one piece of a much larger puzzle of Latinx-American identity, *In the Heights* dismantles the expectation of its white audience that Latinx characters are solely drug dealers and gang members, but rather, immigrants working to rise above their standing, a story which likely resonates for many in the audience.

With all these efforts to portray its characters in a universal light, *In the Heights* does run a risk of its characters becoming white-washed, and through the dismantling of stereotypes asserting that the Latinx communities are no different than white ones. The show avoids diluting the cultural identity of the character through the celebration of Latinx-American pride.

For example, one of *In the Heights*' main themes revolves around the struggle of US born second-generation immigrants to understand and identify with their Latin culture.³⁰ In the song, *When You're Home*, Nina wonders what her life might have been like if she had grown up in Puerto Rico with "[her] people"³¹ having dropped out of university as she feels she has "lost [her] way"³² in her quest to understand her cultural identity. In *Carnaval Del Barrio*, Carla attempts to categorize her heritage proclaiming "I'm Chile-Domini-Curican!/But I always say

²⁹ Hudes et al. *In the Heights: the Complete Book and Lyrics of the Broadway Musical*

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ *In The Heights Original Broadway Cast Recording*

³² Ibid

I'm from Queens".³³ Even Usnavi, who dreams of moving to the Dominican Republic where his parents grew up eventually comes to the realization that "[the] corner [where his bodega is] is [his] destiny".³⁴ The show demonstrates the pride of the unique cultural experiences of its characters in being simultaneously Latinx and American.

This is further illustrated by the musical and lyrical choices beyond the plot or characters. A staggering 82% of the songs on the soundtrack include some amount of spoken Spanish nonchalantly mixed in with the English lyrics.³⁵ This colloquial mixing of languages, described as "Spanglish" is common among Latinx-American communities, and Puerto Rican communities in New York especially.³⁶ Not only does this use of Spanglish offer an authentically Latinx American portrayal of its characters, but it actively forces its white audience to make space for its characters unique cultural identity. While the show's program includes a handy translation guide for non-Spanish speakers³⁷, it does not make any attempt to pander to their unfamiliarity with Spanish, but rather demands them to meet the characters at their level.

The show's pride for its culture is most notably presented, however, in the pastiche of musical styles the show employs. In addition to traditional musical theatre song structure, *In the Heights* is primarily told through hip hop music, with Latin American pop styles incorporated throughout. The show opens with a rhythm played on palitos³⁸, which becomes the beat on which Usnavi begins rapping his narration³⁹. Rap music, prior to this point, was not typical for

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ In The Heights Original Broadway Cast Recording

³⁶ Abiezer Santiago-Cruz, 2020

³⁷ Program for In the Heights, 2008

³⁸ A Puerto Rican instrument made up of wooden sticks hit together to create percussion

³⁹ In the Heights Original Broadway Cast Recording

Broadway musicals⁴⁰, but was a common style of music employed by young Latinx-Americans in urban centers to express frustration with a social system that systematically oppressed them.⁴¹ In using this inter-weaving of musical styles, Miranda is not only representing the sound of the neighborhood, but also rebelling against traditional musical theatre writing styles, while remaining in their structure. The result is an unapologetically Latinx-American score which retains the familiar structural makings of a musical, without sacrificing the musical authenticity of its subject.

In theme, use of language and musical style, *In the Heights* misses no opportunity to celebrate the unique cultural identity of the specific Latinx-American community it represents, even if it means asking the audience to do a little extra work to remain on the same page.

It is this balancing act of allowing the audience relate to its characters through their universally immigrant stories and dismantling of stereotypes, while not sacrificing the unique cultural elements of the community that allows *In the Heights* to be such a successful piece for communication between cultural groups. What the show ultimately achieves is a reclaiming of the narrative surrounding Latinx characters in the musical theatre canon.

What is more, no one expected *In the Heights* to achieve the kind of success that it did.⁴² The musical's writers were virtually unknown at the time, with Miranda having only recently graduated from university⁴³. However, much to everyone's surprise the show won the 2008 Tony Award for Best Musical, and broke all box office expectations, becoming an

⁴⁰ Internet Broadway Database

⁴¹ Smitherman, *The Chain Remain the Same' Communicative Practices in the Hip Hop Nation*, 1997.

⁴² Heinze, 2008

⁴³ Ibid

internationally known staple.⁴⁴ Today, productions of *In the Heights* have been mounted everywhere from Vancouver to South Korea⁴⁵, and Miranda has become a symbol for representation on Broadway, consulting on the integration of Spanish lyrics into the 2009 revival of *West Side Story*, as well as penning the international sensation *Hamilton*.⁴⁶

In the Heights marked a shift in representation on Broadway. While there is progress that can be made, Miranda and Hudes' impressive balancing act created space for other stories of significant but underrepresented groups to gain popularity in the Broadway canon. Ultimately, what Miranda and Hudes prove is that Broadway can, should and will encompass more than the traditional culturally homogenous stories and that at the end of the day, we do, indeed, have a lot in common.

⁴⁴ Internet Broadway Database

⁴⁵ Musical Theatre International

⁴⁶ Internet Broadway Database

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