

# SPACES AND FLOWS IN THE PUERTO RICAN BARRIO: LATERO STORIES, BODEGA DREAMS.

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## **PALABRAS CLAVE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Taking Manuel Castells's idea of globalization in a world of late capitalism as a "space of flows," where mobility and instability are essential to the workings of the system, the article looks at the role of the barrio and its ethnic dwellers as forces of stability and local resistance. If it is undeniable that many recent political movements of a clearly oppositional stance have gained visibility through the occupation of particularly prominent sites (whether in Zucotti Park, Tahrir Square or la Puerta del Sol, among others), can we also view the barrio as another site of metaphorical occupation, a bulwark against the forces of capitalist infiltration and gentrification? Can we then assume barrio dwellers as largely opposed to the economic dynamics of globalization? The article explores this issue by analyzing two Puerto Rican texts, Tato Laviera's "Latero Story" and Ernesto Quiñonez's *Bodega Dreams*, where the characters occupy diverse and complex positionalities with regards to the promises of a renewed American dream.

## **RESUMEN**

Partiendo de las ideas de Manuel Castells sobre el mundo contemporáneo como "space of flows" en el que la constante movilidad espacial de productos y trabajadores es esencial para el funcionamiento del sistema, el artículo analiza la función del barrio y de sus habitantes como espacios estables y de resistencia. Si asumimos que muchos movimientos políticos de oposición a los procesos de globalización neoliberal han surgido mediante la ocupación de espacios concretos y de particular significación

(como Zucotti Park, Tahrir Square y la Puerta del Sol, entre otros), ¿podemos explorar la función del barrio étnico como otro espacio metafóricamente ocupado, otro espacio de resistencia frente a la infiltración neoliberal y al aburguesamiento? ¿Podemos asumir que los habitantes del barrio étnico ocupan posiciones necesariamente contrarias a la dinámica globalizadora? El artículo explora estos elementos mediante el análisis de dos textos de autores puertorriqueños, “Latero Story”, de Tato Laviera, y *Bodega Dreams*, de Ernesto Quiñonez. En estos dos textos, los personajes ocupan posiciones diversas y complejas en relación a las promesas de un sueño americano renovado.

*i am a twentieth century welfare recipient  
moonlighting in midnight as a latero  
i am becoming an entrepreneur  
an american success story*

Tato Laviera, “Latero Story”

*Elites are cosmopolitan, people are local.*

M. Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*

At the beginning of Ernesto Quiñonez’s debut novel, *Bodega Dreams*, Chino, the narrator and protagonist of the story remembers when as a child he would get together with his friend Sapo to go fly kites on the roof of some broken-down project in Spanish Harlem. One day Chino tells his friend, “You know, Sapo, ... if we could fly on top of these things, we could get out of here. You know?” Sapo’s reply illustrates the novel’s revisionist approach to the utopian dreams and grim realities of the people of the barrio: “Why would you want to fucken leave this place? ... This neighborhood is beautiful, broh” (11). In his unhesitant devotion to the beauty of the barrio, its dark alleys and broken-down projects, Sapo brings down Chino’s dreams of flying out to a dimly intuited world of economic promise and spatial mobility. A world that for Sapo, we may surmise, represents the contrary threat of alienation and rootlessness. Chino and Sapo’s spontaneous exchange resonates in contemporary spatial politics in the opposition between the global and the local, between the promises of cosmopolitan mobility and the limitations of the traditional attachment to place. The links between mobility and economic success work both at the national and international level. As in their case, contemporary dreams of success tend to link together the ascent in the economic scale with *mobility* in spatial terms, while remaining fixed in space is equated with a certain economic lack. In this context, the demands and promises of job mobility,

globalization, and the international market emerge as constant threats to the more traditional sense of emplacement of the self and the community—the world that Sapo seems to want to preserve.

And yet, the modern turn towards globalization and transnational mobility has, Manuel Castells reminds us, the paradoxical effect of enhancing local formations, whether joined together by the ties of ethnicity, class, religion, or otherwise. In a world increasingly defined by what Castells terms “the space of flows,” which he defines as a new spatial dimension holding the contradictory quality of being “globally connected and locally disconnected, physically and socially” (404), recent challenges to the process of globalization increasingly come from groups or communities oriented around particular enclaves or defined by the occupation of distinctive sites. Castells’s “space of places”—a space of isolated, largely powerless local communities, refracted in Sapo’s barrio allegiances—seems thus to be making a melancholic comeback in the midst of a world of international flows and incessant personal mobility. If, following Lefebvre (1991), the capitalist space is the result of the flows and movements of capital, then place might be seen to represent a contrary motion, with the interruption, or settling of flows in specific nodes. Castells integrates both concepts in his “dual cities,” urban systems that are “socially and spatially polarized between high value-making groups and functions on the one hand and devalued social groups and downgraded spaces on the other hand” (14). This article initially explores the presumably spontaneous eruption of “downgraded spaces,” namely the American ethnic barrios which seem to resist or interrupt the advance of capitalist flows. The article then focuses on the literary representation of one particular enclave, the Puerto Rican barrio in New York, and how its dwellers appropriate the forces of market capitalism to construct both utopian—as in Tato Laviera’s “Latero Story”—and resisting spaces—as in Ernesto Quiñonez’s *Bodega Dreams*—as they struggle to achieve spatial stability.<sup>1</sup>

If global capitalist flows thrive on placelessness,<sup>2</sup> on the porosity of borders and the constant relocation of capital and resources, some contemporary “emplaced” experiences seem to struggle to arrest (or even undo) that process by securely locating themselves on the map, in very conspicuous sites with clear geographic coordinates. Lately, these places of resistance have sprung up in highly visible, central urban sites, whether in Zucotti Park (New York), Tahrir Square (Cairo), Puerta del Sol (Madrid), or even more recently, Taksim Square (Istanbul). If there is

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<sup>1</sup> The ethnic barrio can be seen to represent the promise of emplacement, giving the immigrant a sense of community and belonging which can counteract the displacement inherent to immigrant experiences. And yet, the threat of spatial instability is also pervasive, both in the form of lurking gentrification as well as the changing face of barrios with the arrival of new waves of immigrants.

<sup>2</sup> The notion of placelessness is used here, following Relph (1976) and Castells (2000), among others, to refer to spaces associated with the accelerated flow of workers and goods around the globe, where local ways of life and place identities are undermined; places that fail to provide a space for the celebration of public culture.

anything linking all these sites, despite their differential and complex origins and motivations, it is their cultural and geographical centrality: they are all situated in the center of major urban formations, and also represent cultural visibility at the (economic) center of the nation. Their claims for political agency come from their staging their dissensus at highly visible, politically central, and clearly cartographed sites. And yet, other alternative and less noticeable sites materialize on a daily basis from the almost invisible margins of those dual cities, from segregated neighborhoods, from barrio experiences, from the abject and the urban residue. Though located in the margins, both socially and economically, these sites also propose a new “space of places” that might be seen to arrest the global economic flows of universal reach that Castells theorizes. In the face of economic globalization, particular enclaves like neighborhoods with a distinctive ethnic component emerge as both permeable and porous spaces, adamantly affirming their distinctive and differential identity. While inevitably traversed by the forces and promises of multicultural diversity and international capitalist flows, the inhabitants of the barrios engage in complex processes of self-making appropriating and refracting the international market within their local contexts.<sup>3</sup>

## FROM CAPITALIST DECONTEXTUALIZATION TO ETHNIC EMPLACEMENT

*Decontextualization, the distantiating from place and its sociomoral pressures, is an autonomic impulse of capitalism at the millennium.*

Comaroff and Comaroff, “Millennial Capitalism”

One central factor in the dissolution of the space of places and its transformation into a world of flows is the increasing fragmentation of the workplace as a source of personal value and identity, and its gradual replacement by widespread consumption. No longer the result of a perfect union between its two components—work *and* place—the workplace is under erasure in contemporary political economies. It has entered Castells’s “space of flows” inasmuch as it is constantly in motion, always being removed to an elsewhere. Even if nation-states continue to try to regulate the free flow of workers, labor has become a nomadic, deterritorialized experience, no longer confined within an enclaved territory. Gone is the “sense of rootedness within organically conceived structures of production”

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<sup>3</sup> Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004: 110) theorize the complex negotiations of migrant identity in reference to the interactions between “ways of being” (“the actual social relations and practices that individuals engage in”) and “ways of belonging” (“practices that signal or enact an identity which demonstrate a conscious connection to a particular group”). Their case analyses reveal how transnational migrants engage in particular ways of being which may even contradict or significantly deviate from their ways of belonging.

(Comaroff 2001: 303) that gave workers a sense of identity tied to the factory, the community, and the family. Now, the global dispersal of primary production, with the constant export of labor, and the migration of workers, have dissolved the grounds of the workplace, making the second term of the compound almost meaningless. As the *workforce* has come to prominence, work and place have become unchained, alienated, running in opposite directions. And so are owners and workers, the wealthy and the poor. They are not only economically distant, but also spatially apart. Even when they are all on the move, nationally and internationally, they rarely meet on the global highways of the international space of flows.

The decontextualizing forces of neoliberalism, with the international market replacing enclaved production, and digital transactions replacing neighborhood shopping, result in a spectral or ghostly socioeconomic reality. While the traditional contours of society and the subject are constantly being eroded, the organic unity of society and community equally come under threat. The workings of neoliberal capitalism, French sociologist P. Bourdieu maintains (1998), have intensified the erosion of modern sociopolitical collectives into yet smaller formations, more easily accessible to capitalist infiltration and control. Bourdieu defines the process of fragmentation of all social collectives in the interest of neoliberal expansionism in the following terms:

This movement, made possible by the politics of financial deregulation, towards the neoliberal utopia of a pure and perfect market is accomplished through the transforming and, it needs to be said, destructive action of all its political measures, . . . attempting to bring into question all the collective structures capable of setting obstacles to the logic of the pure market; the nation, whose margin for maneuver ceaselessly decreases; labor groups, with, for instance, the individualization of salaries and careers as a function of individual competence and the resulting atomization of workers; collectives for the defense of workers' rights, unions, associations, cooperatives; the family itself, which, through the constitution of markets based upon age groups, loses a part of its control on consumption. (1998: 3)

Bourdieu's schematic presentation neatly captures the economic interests both behind globalization as well as behind its presumed opposite, insularity, fragmentation, atomization. In this bleak image, there is no escape from the logic of the "pure market." The neoliberal ideology of economic development has gradually and inexorably undermined all institutions of collective solidarity.<sup>4</sup> Its major obstacles (the nation, labor groups, the family, and other "collective structures") have all failed and been coopted by the premises and promises of consumption.

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<sup>4</sup> Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff stress that the internationalization of the market "has led to a decline in the importance of domestic production in many once industrialized countries—which, along with the worldwide rise of the service sector and the feminization of the workforce, has dispersed class relations, alliances, and antinomies across the four corners of the earth." (2000: 300)

Bourdieu's presentation resounds with echoes of a Foucaultian universe in which the all powerful and ever-present "discourse" has been replaced by the spectral "market" and its laws. The social logic (based on justice, solidarity and place) is in ruins under the reign of the new economic logic (based upon competition, efficiency and dislocation). All intermediaries between the individual and the social group, owners and producers, places and flows, are eliminated in the interest of a free market (cf. Mitrovic, 38).

Just like other elements of social emplacement, as Bourdieu indicates, the idea of the nation is one of the unwilling victims of the globalizing thrust of contemporary market forces. Over the last few decades the demise of the nation—already an accepted and presumably irreversible economic reality—has given rise, Hall argues (2000), to two parallel motions, over and under the nation-state: the global and the local. However, the present weakening of nation-state power, inexorably linked to the global flows of capital and of international elites, is somehow strengthening minority, ethnic, and diasporic ties as sources for personal and communal identification. While, even in the most recent past, ethnicity and race were inextricably linked to and bounded by the category of nationality—much like economics—modern diasporic and migratory movements have freed the ethnic element from state boundaries. Modern individuals continue to live *in* nation-states, but "they tend to be only conditionally, partially and situationally citizens of nation-states" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2005: 127). As the contours of the nation become blurry, its borders made porous, the space of ethnicity becomes stronger, exploding in complexities and double allegiances. Countering the atomization of the world that Bourdieu postulates, ethnicity has come to figure as the one link of inter-national, cross-gender, inter-generational solidarity that is perhaps still gaining strength. Once the nation-state has proved ineffective as an instrument to balance "the 'precarisation' of life brought about by the advance of the neoliberal utopia" (Moreiras 271), ethnicity has come center stage. Rather than debilitating or fragmenting ethnic identifications, globalization, whether economic, cultural, or social, has had the subsequent effect of building up and strengthening ethnic ties.

Just as the global and the local are not exclusionary but complementary forces in contemporary world politics<sup>5</sup>—with globalization itself as a localization process (Schiller 2008, 15)—ethnic identifications across porous national borders have relied also on a firm sense of the local, a sense of place. If diasporic groups are essentially translocal, conceiving of their communities "as ideally continuous with the populations of diasporas in other nation-states and with the homeland" (Tölölyan 1996: 17), ethnic groups, despite its shifting and complex dynamic, tend to cohere

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<sup>5</sup> It is now widely accepted that the local and particular is but one more of the faces of globalization (Žižek 1994; Hall 2000). However, the local is not to be mistaken with place (or, for that matter, the global with space), for the local and the global are scales or levels of analysis, but they are not in themselves locations or places.

locally. Ethnicity emerges at the intersection between displacement and emplacement, not only as a decentered “site,” a de-spatialized, transnational, mobile category which takes up the empty spaces left by the nation,<sup>6</sup> but also, and perhaps more importantly, as a clearly emplaced and located practice. The contemporary experience of ethnicity connects with spatial location, with the distinctive identity of the neighborhood and barrio, a bulwark against the capitalist atomization of the social. Whether historically local, or the result of modern transnational migratory flows, ethnically marked groups tend to cohere around particular places, around ethnic enclaves from which they derive their identity as well as, if we follow Portes’s claims,<sup>7</sup> their own economic strength.

This process of ethnic mobilization and re-localization has significantly run parallel to the evolution of transnational corporations, equally operating outside nation-state cartographies while inextricably linked to the local idiosyncrasies of the workforce and to advantageous local labor and tax regulations. It is small wonder, then, that ethnic collectivities, even if frequently traversed by difficult economic circumstances, have come to play a central role both in the national and transnational evolution of the market. And yet, despite the evident parallelism, the multiple and complex experiences of ethnicity are not necessarily complicit with the logics and flows of the market; rather, they might represent one of the dominant forms of collective organization missing from Bourdieu’s list of obstacles to the progress of the “neoliberal utopia.” Hardly a mere cultural category<sup>8</sup>, the “ethnic” element could well be posited as the ultimate site of local resistance in a world turned—at least in the economic sphere—inexorably global.

### THE MARKET AND ETHNIC BLINDNESS

If the laws of the international market thrive on bringing down national borders, they also display a willful indifference for ethnic borders. Neoliberalism, the claim goes, is unsympathetic and inhospitable to difference. In its emphasis on the individual, it is indifferent to the group and to attachments made by individuals—whether by the ties of culture, religion, ethnicity or otherwise. The

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<sup>6</sup> Perhaps as a response to this situation, in the last few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century modern democratic nation-states willingly declared themselves openly multicultural and multiethnic, therefore welcoming difference, hybridity, and creolization as basic elements of the national experience.

<sup>7</sup> Portes (1981) articulates his analysis of migrant communities around the notion of the “ethnic enclave,” which he defines as “immigrant groups which concentrate in a distinct spatial location and organize a variety of enterprises serving their own ethnic market and/or the general population.” (290-91). Despite Portes’s claims that the ethnic enclave is beneficial for enclave workers, recent scholarship has shed doubts on such claims (cf. Xie and Gough 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Constant and Zimmermann (2011) contend that “while identity has occupied a central role in other social sciences such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, etc., it has not been fully incorporated in economic theory and empirics” (149).

ideology behind neoliberal expansionism presumes to be race-neutral, blind to all ethnic concerns, while promising equal prosperity for all. Within a neoliberal ideology, Davis proposes, “the relevance of the raced subject, racial identity and racism is subsumed under the auspices of meritocracy” (350). And yet, despite claims to the contrary, ethnic cultural differences all too easily translate as economic inequality (García Canclini 106), insomuch as the capitalist territorialization of all the corners of the globe (and the dark alleys of the city, as Laviera would claim) require the naturalization of economic difference, labor displacement, and social exclusion. Though capitalist territorialization operates through the blurring of boundaries and obstacles to the advance of the market, it simultaneously works by reinforcing inequality and social, even local differences, rather than obliterating them. After all, Davila claims, neoliberalism inevitably connects with “homelessness, poverty, residential segregation, and other forms of inequality” (9). In the US, recent studies show that the income gulf has incredibly widened over the last three decades, with the top 10 per cent of the population owning more than half of the nation’s wealth (Saez 2013). Michael Walzer (qtd. Goldberg 29), for example, has statistically proved that during the multicultural decade of the 1980s in the United States, economic distribution grew more unequal and in racially defined ways. Additionally, this economic divide—which moves along the boundaries of ethnicity—has proved beneficial to the market. Recent economic research<sup>9</sup> has also revealed how, in the case of ethnic groups and immigrants, maintaining and even promoting the recognition of their ethnic difference is the prerequisite for their effective incorporation into the national economy. As long as they appear to be different from the dominant population, they will contribute to the economy by being assigned to particular jobs that require their presumably distinctive skills and talents, constructed and perceived as inherently different from those of the native population. The ethnic others’ ability to integrate into the economic system is then a factor of their intrinsic difference, allowing them to be considered complementary rather than competitor.<sup>10</sup>

However, the forces of the market act not only from above (as they appropriate and commodify the margins), but also from below. It may be appropriate

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Klaus F. Zimmermann, “The Economics of Migrant Ethnicity,” *Journal of Population Economics*, 2007, 20.3: 487-494.

<sup>10</sup> And yet, the reinforcing of differences is not without its perils, as it may lead to oppositional and resistant identities that are hardly incorporated into the workings of the market. In *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*, Massey and Denton propose that segregated neighborhoods may lead some individuals to “an oppositional culture that devalues work, schooling and marriage,” therefore obstructing their productive contribution to the market. As Lisa Lowe indicates, “these hybridities are always in the process of, on the one hand, being appropriated and commodified by commercial culture and, on the other, of being rearticulated for the creation of oppositional ‘resistance cultures.’” (82)



to analyze the production of the global from the perspective of the local. How does the inhabitant of the barrio appropriate and digest the push and pull of the market? How do these inhabitants articulate their “space of places” in a context of national and international economic flows? How permeable or porous is the barrio to the depersonalized and dislocated forces of capitalism? Rather than mobility, barrio dwellers reposition *place* at the center of work, experience and identity. They engage in complex processes of self-making vis-à-vis the market—as in Laviera’s “Latero Story”—creating both utopian and resisting spaces—as in E. Quiñonez’s *Bodega Dreams*—through a series of ethnic “decodings and recodings,” as they fill up the capitalist workplaces while struggling to maintain their social places. Writing from the beginnings of the multicultural decade in the first case, and from the presumed end of multiculturalism as a viable model in the second, Laviera and Quiñonez highlight the clash between neoliberal capitalism and the grim realities of liminal existences as they evolve in specific social and economic locations.

### A VIEW FROM THE BARRIO: THE PUERTO RICAN *AQUÍ*

While it is common to look at capitalist space from a global, transnational perspective, it is also possible to look at it from the realms of local knowledge, from the side of place and barrio economics, as Puerto Rican authors consistently illustrate. Puerto Rican narratives, Kandiyoti claims, are recurrently located in the barrio, an urban space which figures as a “central topos of the Puerto Rican diasporic imagination” (157). This barriocentric positioning of the Puerto Rican imagination is not new. Literature that focuses on the economic disenfranchisement of barrio inhabitants in American cities emerged powerfully in the work of Nuyorican writers of the 1960s. The Nuyorican movement produced mostly social and political poetry which denounced the grim conditions, social and economic, of second generation Puerto Ricans living in barrios in major American cities. Among their preferred issues, “the lack of adequate living conditions, ... discrimination in the workplace, the lack of economic opportunities and the conditions of utmost poverty and marginalization” (Aparicio 26) figure prominently. The poetry of the movement emerged, as Algarín expresses it, from “the inner-city jungles,” flowing “between the cracks of concrete sidewalks” (438), using the language of the marginalized, the proletariat, the homeless and the drug addict. This vision permeates Pedro Pietri’s celebrated “Puerto Rican Obituary,” where a series of Puerto Rican immigrants to the US mainland embody the exploited victims of US capitalism and die broke in the pursuit of the American dream. Socioeconomic disenfranchisement and spatial alienation run parallel in the poem. It is only in death that the poetic voice allows the immigrant a form of emplacement in a utopian site called *aquí*, a place uncontaminated by the forces of market capitalism: “aquí there are no dial soap commercials / ... / Aquí tv dinners do not have a future.” Successful

life in the barrio becomes a factor of social emplacement and the displacement of the alienating forces of market capitalism.

The post-Nuyorican poetry of the 1980s and beyond takes up the legacy of Nuyorican poets especially in their emphasis on economic denouncement and cultural resistance. This is the poetic and political stance of post-Nuyorican Tato Laviera's poetry. Puerto Rican cultural vitality and spiritual energy blends in his poetry with a representation of the miserable living conditions in the barrio, to chronicle the "contradictions and complexities of being a Puerto Rican in New York" (Aparicio 28). The sense of place permeates his collections of poetry, with significant titles like *AmeRícan* and *Enclave*, where he explores the in-betweenness and multiple allegiances of New York Puerto Ricans, who live among "intellectual displacements / transplanting raíces / aquí no allá yes aquí allá" (Laviera 2006: 174). If we assume that "place refers to the experience of, and from, a particular location with some sense of boundaries, grounds, and links to everyday practices" (Escobar 152), there is no doubt that the poetic voice in Laviera's poetry is consciously in search of emplacement, aware of its *aquí* and *allá*, and of the movement between the two sides of the self, "across forth and across back / back across and forth back / forth across and back and forth / our trips are walking bridges" ("Amer-Rican"). However, together with the acute sense of cultural location and belonging, Laviera's poetry is also permeated by the needs and demands for economic emplacement, as the characters in his poetry negotiate the gaps between spatial empowerment and economic disempowerment.

### **"HOMO ECONOMICUS" IN THE "INNER-CITY JUNGLE": LAVIERA'S "LATERO STORY"**

In his "Latero Story," Laviera ironically brings capitalist utopias, as well as the dream of upward social mobility, into the territory of the urban residue, both social and material. The *latero* (can picker) in the poem could easily read as the quintessential American, endowed with undisguised ambition and a Puritan ethos even in the grimmest circumstances. Laviera displays his characteristic comic vein to toy with the presumed fluidity of class in American culture. The poem follows the effort of an "ethnic" and "classed" latero trying to "make it big in america," as if class and ethnicity were fluid and invisible. The poem presents a naively optimistic world where the poetic voice blends his reality as a moonlighter with the Anglo-American dream of individualistic success, to display a particularly ironic gospel of wealth. Laviera turns the economic ladder upside down, offering a view from the bottom which highlights the internal contradictions between the grim reality of social marginality, and the American ideology of equality. The latero's economic dream reads as a naïve enactment of the values of "millennial capitalism," which scholars Comaroff and Comaroff define as "a capitalism that, if rightly harnessed, is

invested with the capacity wholly to transform the universe of the marginalized and disempowered” (2001: 292). In this economic abstraction, significantly at odds with the experience of barrio dwellers, place and identity are erased, and so is history and memory. The latero displays a blind adherence to a belief in the neoliberal ideology that presumes that “individuals are supposedly freed from identity and operate under the limiting assumptions that hard work will be rewarded if the game is played according to the rules” (Davis 350). This belief is also evident in the very title of the poem, with the combination of the Spanish word “Latero” and the English term “story” which later acquires the meaning of “an american success story” *a la* Horatio Alger. The poem equally plays with the absence of working class consciousness or of class solidarity, both replaced by a form of social Darwinism. The poetic voice resounds as a sort of *homo economicus*<sup>11</sup> (which Bourdieu terms “an anthropological monster,” 1998: 209), the natural inhabitant of a world where the laws of the free market appear as the natural state of things. Despite his incapacity to even buy gloves (“They undermine my daily profit”), the latero speaks the deliberately obscure language and numbers of capitalism:

i can now hire workers at twenty  
 five cents an hour guaranteed salary  
 and fifty per cent of two and one half cents  
 profit on each can collected (1988: 13)

“Latero Story” illustrates the disjuncture at the workplace, where the promises of capitalist flows and spaces are ironically undermined by the realities of the barrio. At the very moment the poetic voice dreams of the formation of a lateros’ union, he also dreams of climbing up the “ladder of success” which will simultaneously separate him from other lateros and turn him into an executive. If Foucault claimed that individuals are the vehicles of power, and not its point of application, Laviera’s poem seems to illustrate that individuals are also the vehicles of the market, as well as its subjects. More than the discarded materials of capitalist ideology, its residue and waste, the cans and their pickers are essential to that very same ideology. The latero is one more agent of capitalist territorialization. “i have hired bag ladies to keep peddlers / from my territories,” (1988: 13) confesses the poetic voice, speaking the language of corporate executives. He enters the dark alleys, the spaces of the abject, the residual and the homeless, of junk and waste, away from the industriousness that presumably characterizes regular citizens. And yet, the latero brings that same industriousness into those dark recesses of the city.

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<sup>11</sup> The concept of *homo economicus*, or “economic man,” emerges in the work of John Stuart Mill, as “a being who desires to possess wealth, and who is capable of judging the comparative efficacy of means for obtaining that end.” In this view, community members’ acts are guided by self interest with the ultimate goal of maximizing material and personal benefits (cf. Rajko 59).

At the end of the poem, the grim material reality of the latero is overpowered by the economic ideology of American capitalism, again ironically encoded in the final phrase, “god bless America” (1988: 13)

Capitalism works in the poem as a social and economic imaginary, all the more powerful because of its overt illusory nature. The poem displaces the ethnic individual from the specificity of communal ties and places, and into the capitalist reorganization of relations of production. The grounds of self-making for the latero are relocated within the sphere of abstract labor relations, of benefits and profits, numbers and percentages. Instead of emphasizing the *aquí*, the places of the self and community, the latero thinks in terms of “my territories.” Buried in the hard material circumstances of the barrio, the latero blindly adheres to the neoliberal agenda, based on a “contractarian conception of human relations, property relations, and exchange relations” which result in the “commodification of almost everything, and [the] celebration of deregulated private exchange” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000: 328). Though the poem is saturated with race (its very title allows the reader to locate it in the barrio both linguistically and spatially), it is also permeated with neoliberal practices that use capitalism “to hide racial (and other) inequalities by relocating racially coded economic disadvantage and reassigning identity-based biases to the private and personal spheres” (Davis 349). Collective values make room for the arrival of rampant individualism, at the same time that the narrator’s identity as a member of a certain collective is erased from consciousness. There is no place for family in the poem and in the experience of the latero, no communal ties, no barrio identity. If the barrio is, as has been claimed, the new “imagined community” after the demise of the nation-state, Laviera’s latero sees no “deep, horizontal comradeship” (Anderson 7) as much as vertical distantiation. If, as Sassen contends, “the new networked sub-economy occupies a strategic geography, partly deterritorialized, that cuts borders and connects a variety of points on the globe” (2006: 42), the latero illustrates that the forces of economic globalization are not necessarily located on the outside, at the macro-spatial level, but can also be inserted at the source of the local. Hyper-mobility and economic globalization require place-bound low-wage workers, just as mass-production and distribution of canned refreshments requires can pickers working the alley, at the local level.

And yet, though the poetic voice is a Puerto Rican latero, a culturally displaced individual who can only lay claim to an identity across boundaries, the spatial element is significantly absent in the poem. The latero reveals the essentially temporal nature of his experience, as we move with him through his workday, into the night, and past midnight till dawn. The site of the self is reduced to the “outdoor facilities / congested with putrid residues” (13), whereas the site of the community is non-existent. However, as Henri Lefebvre argues, “all ‘subjects’ are situated in a space in which they must either recognize themselves or lose themselves” (35). The latero has assumed an ideology that brings him close to the edge, to losing himself.

The process of creating an identity involves accepting “a role and a function” which “implies a location, a place in society, a position” (Lefebvre 182-3), and therefore this process is necessarily spatial in nature. Though unknown to him, it is the barrio environment that gives the latero a place to speak from. His possible escape from the lure of the mostly unattainable economic flows that he dreams about might reside, if we follow Lefebvre, in the recovery of a sense of place. A recovery that pervades Willy Bodega’s experiences in Quiñonez’s *Bodega Dreams*.

### QUIÑONEZ’S *BODEGA DREAMS* AND BARRIO ECONOMICS

Significantly inspired by the Nuyorican writers,<sup>12</sup> Quiñonez’s *Bodega Dreams* revisits the *homo economicus* in a contemporary barrio environment, with strong barrio consciousness. The novel dramatizes the threat of capitalist displacement of the barrio, as low income Latinos living in Spanish Harlem are on the verge of eviction, leaving room for the gentrification of the neighborhood. The forces of capitalism and the market represent, once again, the threat of removal and up-rooting for a marginalized community made up of displaced Puerto Ricans. As if stuck in a totalizing binary network, the barrio comes to represent a threatened concrete stability, set against the abstract dynamic forces of capital. And yet, it is in this context that Willie Bodega, the character whose dreams the novel dramatizes, will use those capitalist forces of dispersal and dislocation to re-root and re-place the barrio and its Latino inhabitants.

*Bodega Dreams* is modeled on F. Scott Fitzgerald’s 1925 classic tale of economic splendor. And like *Gatsby*, Quiñonez claims, Willie Bodega “would do anything to become rich” (Wiegand 2001), by illegal means. However, the dream here is essentially barrio-centric, with wealth as an instrument that refracts on the barrio itself. The protagonist, Willie Bodega, uses money from his drug trafficking operation to strike deals with city officials in charge of urban planning, in an effort to stop the gentrification of the barrio. It is his dream to renovate the barrio while

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<sup>12</sup> Not only has Quiñonez acknowledged this influence in numerous interviews; the novel itself dramatizes such influence time and again: stanzas from Nuyorican poets Miguel Piñero and Pedro Pietri appear in every section of the novel; at the end of the narrative, during Willie Bodega’s funeral, Quiñonez brings together a long list of prominent artists from the Nuyorican movement: “The rest of Bodega’s pallbearers were ex-Young-Lords: Pablo Guzman, Juan Gonzalez, Felipe Luciano, Denise Oliver, Iris Morales. Standing near them were some artists from T

their eyes out next to Piri Thomas, Edward Rivera, and Jack Agueros. Nearly the entire East Harlem aristocracy.” (2000: 208)

saving it for a social class of Latino professionals born and raised there. He aims for the barrio to be a space of community, a space where dreams can come true, despite the mean streets and hard realities. Just like Bodega strives to reclaim the barrio of East Harlem, in the heart of New York City, as the proper place of Latinos, Quiñonez appropriates Scott Fitzgerald's literary classic, *The Great Gatsby*, a literary terrain long assumed to be occupied, and makes the story his own. The novel dramatizes a metafictional reverse move, as it is now the Latino that occupies the central space of western culture, a space assumed as private and inaccessible to the ethnic other.

However, the setting for Quiñonez's novel is quite distant from Gatsby's mansion. The barrio described in *Bodega Dreams* is significantly akin to the dark alleys of Laviera's "Latero Story." In this barrio, as the narrator puts it, "you lived in projects with pissed-up elevators, junkies on the stairs, posters of the rapist of the month, whores ..." (5). Quiñonez takes his title from Miguel Piñero's book of poems *La Bodega Sold Dreams*, specifically from the homonymous poem, where the poetic voice aspires to becoming the spokesperson for the barrio's Hispanic working class. If, as Piñero portrays in the poem, it is in the bodegas that dreams are sold, we could easily picture Laviera's latero as a regular there, cultivating his dream. He might be the latero "sweatin' & swearin' / & slavin' for the final dime," engaged in a dream of individualistic commercial success that the bodega as store would elicit. And yet, the poem disassociates itself from economic dreams and emphasizes the bodega as social space, a space of storytelling and communal coming together, a space, as Algarín put it, "where our poets' words & songs /are sung" (Piñero 2004: 3). It is this shift from a dream of economic success to one of cultural empowerment that Quiñonez's novel dramatizes. Bodega, the title character, has made it economically, but only to culturally emplace himself deeper in the barrio. Though wealthy enough to buy and renovate numerous projects in the barrio, Bodega's is not just a story of upward mobility, as the latero's fantasy. And neither is his dream one of individualistic economic success. Rather, his is a story of collective emplacement, of finding the *aquí* in the barrio, the place of self and community.

And yet, Bodega's re-appropriation of the local, the barrio, as a well-mapped site, a cultural space of resistance against the threat of capitalist displacement, inevitably falls prey to similar capitalist dynamics. The way towards emplacement, towards undoing the forces of capitalist deterritorialization represented by gentrification, is paved by economic empowerment, both a promise and a threat. As David Harvey cautions in *The Condition of Postmodernity*,

Movements of opposition to the disruptions of home, community, territory, and nation by the restless flow of capital are legion.... Yet all such movements, no matter how well articulated their aims, run up against a seemingly immovable paradox. ...[T]he movements have to confront the question of value and its expression as well as the

necessary organization of space and time appropriate to their own reproduction. In so doing, they necessarily open themselves to the dissolving power of money as well as to the shifting definitions of space and time arrived at through the dynamics of capital circulation. Capital, in short, continues to dominate, and it does so in part through superior command over space and time. (1989: 238-239)

The paradox the novel illustrates centers on the question of how to align economic empowerment (and the threatening “dissolving power of money,” in Harvey’s words above) with ethnic identity and spatial resistance. The novel is permeated by this double perspective, where economic success reconnects with marginality, and where the view from the top is filtered with the perspective from the bottom. This double vision, up and down, is captured by the narrator as he dwells on the view of lofty Manhattan from its bridges, counteracted by the reality of low barrios: “Manhattan at night seen from its surrounding bridges is Oz, it’s Camelot or Eldorado, full of color and magic. What those skyscrapers and light don’t let on is that hidden away lies Spanish Harlem, a slum that has been handed down from immigrant to immigrant, like used clothing worn and reworn, stitched and restitched by different ethnic groups who continue to pass it on” (161). The image also captures the presence of anti-capitalist tactics in the heart of the capitalism, as Spanish Harlem refuses full renovation and is, instead, partially repaired in order to be inhabited again.

However, the capitalist threat looms over the barrio in the form of impending gentrification, which would result in yet another displacement for its ethnic inhabitants. This new threat of placelessness brought on by the color and magic of Eldorado is particularly evident for the Puerto Rican barrio, whose inhabitants live in a constant state of in-betweenness insomuch as they “can often claim belonging,” Kandiyoti argues, “in neither the homeland nor the places of resettlement” (163). The displacement inherent in the experience of migration can easily align with the threat of placelessness resulting from the capitalist job market, to generate a dislocated workforce at the mercy of the push and pull of the market. And yet, if immigration runs parallel to the dislocating and displacing forces of neoliberalism, with placelessness as the ultimate destination, Quiñonez’s novel envisions the illusion of a return journey. While the forces of capitalism infiltrate the barrio to lead inexorably to placelessness and uprootedness—with characters dreaming of flying away on a kite—Bodega uses those same forces in his dream of roots, place and community in the barrio. In *Bodega Dreams*, Willy Bodega’s dream of economic empowerment does not trigger a move out of the barrio, but rather, into the barrio, for himself and for the community. The narrator of the novel, Chino, a young student about to graduate from college, could easily have become the aspiring escapee from the barrio, running away from dark alleys in pursuit of the dream. And yet, thanks to Willie Bodega, he chooses to stay and become empowered by the barrio (Kevane 133). It is Bodega who facilitates the dream of roots by offering

Chino—whose real name is Julio “Mercado,” Spanish for “market”—a renovated apartment at an affordable rate. Rather than a novel about dreams of upward social mobility for barrio dwellers, Quiñonez gives us a contrary view where economic empowerment does not lead to spatial mobility, but to barrio consciousness and collective rootedness. Whereas Laviera’s latero ironically appropriates the American dream and speaks it from displacement, Bodega seeks to re-place the dream, to connect the dream to the place, re-directing the capitalist flows that could vacate the barrio, and re-rooting it.

The novel then escapes the facile duality between mobile dreams and reactionary emplacement. Local social movements interested in the recovery of community and place commonly emerge in recent scholarship as static, reactionary, oriented towards “being” rather than “becoming.” “Defensive place-based movements,” Smith argues, “are represented as cultural totalities expressing entirely place-bound identities in a world in which the dynamic flows of globalization exist entirely outside their purview” (105). In these views, against the local desire for stability, global capitalism becomes the contrary source of social change. However, *Bodega Dreams* seems to propose, far from being a constrained space outside history, the barrio is a complex site of competing, contradictory cultural meanings which sway between refuge and trap (Domínguez Miguela 197), between resistance and accommodation to dominant modes of power. It is the specific historical and economic conditions of particular inhabitants of the barrio that determine how global forces are interpreted, mediated, appropriated or resisted. Far from the representation of a cohesive urban community, the novel offers multiple individual positionalities with respect to the threats of the forces of capitalist deterritorialization. From Chino’s initial acceptance (in his wanting a bigger apartment) to his final oppositional stance, from Blanca’s selling out to the system, to Bodega’s negotiations of the forces of the market and his projections of those same forces against the market itself. They are all social actors who do not *find* their place in the barrio as much as they *make* such a place through complex negotiations. The novel’s constructions of the local in the barrio is not the result of a timeless essence rooted there, as much as of economic and political processes linked to the outside of the barrio and to global forces that are constantly being appropriated and significantly transformed.

If, as Stuart Hall claims, “Ethnicity is the necessary place or space from which people speak” (2000: 36) both “Latero Story” and *Bodega Dreams* represent two divergent places for the expression of ethnicity. Whereas the characters in *Bodega Dreams* speak “a new language,” a language “born out of the ashes of two cultures clashing with each other” (Kandiyoti 212), Laviera’s latero assumes and refracts a foreign language of numbers and percentages. *Bodega Dreams* represents the strategic emplacement of ethnicity in the face of the threat of capitalist deterritorialization and uprooting, while it offers a wide array of positionalities for



the self. The latero in Laviera's poem, unawares of the limitations of the barrio, assumes a blind position and fully aspires to living the dream of upward mobility. In contrast to the latero, Willie Bodega is fully aware of the particular location, the definite borders and the everyday practices he is negotiating. Both represent distinctive examples of the diversity of responses to the forces of the market that can come from the spaces presumably beyond global flows.

Significantly, Laviera's and Quiñonez's texts refract and rewrite the shift in US Latino literature that took place in the 70s. Dalleo and Machado Sáez locate and identify a transition from "the marginalized but politically committed writers" of the 1960s and 1970s—with Nuyorican poets among them—into a different phase, represented by "the market success of the literary professionals from the multicultural post-Sixties era" (2007: 2). The writers of the earlier phase were considered "progressive or confrontational" given "their rejection of the market and alignment with the ghetto" (Dalleo and Machado Sáez 2007: 2). Laviera's "Latero Story" plays with this identification, revealing and rewriting it through the contrary image of the latero, whose naïve, uncritical acceptance of the forces of the market reads inevitably ironic. In contrast, the newer writers of the so-called multicultural era are significantly seen as less "confrontational"; they are considered "apolitical or even conservative, offering tales of upward mobility and becoming darlings of the publishing industry" (2007: 2). And yet, Quiñonez equally undermines and counteracts such vision by rooting his characters in the barrio, fully conscious of the forces of the market, and with a declared intention to use the enemy's tools to the benefit of the Latino community. Quiñonez's text occupies a multiplicity of literary locations as it both aligns with the forces of the market—by rewriting Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* in a ghetto environment; by engaging the detective formula; and even by changing the ending to satisfy editorial demands (Domínguez Barajas 22)—while it simultaneously reveals a belligerent demand for a politics of social justice in the face of the workings of the market. Both texts equally illustrate how one's position towards the contemporary space of capitalist flows is not determined by the place we speak from, as much as by our positioning in relation to social processes directly affected by the economic, the political and ideological. Though speaking from similar place-bound positions, the latero and Bodega assume contradictory positionalities, proving that though inevitably traversed by the forces of international capitalist flows as well as by the pull of the local, barrio dwellers are not the victims as much as the social actors in a complex process of self-fashioning. The marginal inhabitant of the barrio bears the marks of multiple identities, as Laviera's poetic voice claims in "Ame-Rícan," "defining myself my own way any way many ways." (95).

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