

"Type-Cast Set": What Autobiographies of Latino/a Performers Show About Playing to (Stereo)Type¹

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ABSTRACT: Based on the autobiographies of Rita Moreno, Rosie Perez, and John Leguizamo, this essay establishes a trajectory of the utilization and negotiation of stereotypes for Latino/a performers. These actors struggle with the stereotypical roles they enact. Through "participatory resistance," however, the autobiographies of Latino/a performers can document participation in and resistance to Anglo-America's oppressive and limited perception of Latino/as. Moreover, by writing and producing their own work, they reformulate these roles to better represent the embodied experience of being Latino/a on the stage and screen. Consequently, these texts should be considered as part of the sub-genre of life-writing within Latino/a literature, as they have much to contribute to a discussion of performing Latinidad, namely how to contextualize properly stereotypes in popular culture. Finally, these texts not only tell the life-story of individual Latino/a performers, but they also tell the story of the Latino/a community.

KEYWORDS: Latino/a; stereotypical roles; performers; autobiographies; life-writing; Latino/a literature; participatory resistance; individual and the community.

For the Latino/a writer, the genre of autobiography is attractive, as it allows for the immediate narration of the embodied realities inherent in the Latino/a community. As such, within this genre, for Latino/a writers, "[t]he subject created is at once individual and collective" (Torres 278); Latino/a autobiographers exhibit "the drive to represent the collective experience of their community through narrations of their own individual lives" (Torres-Salliant 61). The autobiography can also offer both the writer and the reader a way to chart discursively the terrain of the public sphere, to measure the republic that is the "House of America" and undertake a crucial role in the idea and restorative project that is America (Sayre 150). These remarks are relevant to any migrant/immigrant population as they make their new home in the United States, but for Latinos/as, the oldest/newest and most numerous population of migrants/immigrants to reside in the United States, this description takes on significance, especially when concerning the autobiographies of Latino/a performers.

The genre of autobiography is "a vehicle for (relatively) unmediated self-expression [and] can be fruitfully approached from its most problematic and 'marginal' instances" (Bérubé 340). Michael Bérubé's comment applies in a possible two-fold manner when concerning Latino/a performers' autobiographies. First, there is the marginal occasion of being from the "Latino/a" population, a racialized and disenfranchised community within the United States; second, often-times this identity-label designation comes along with migrant/immigrant status within the United States-another marginal location. Both of these instances allow for relevant and inno-

vative responses to the interconnections of performance, Latino/a identity, and the community. Nevertheless, the place of Latino/a performers' autobiographies within Latino/a literature must be explained further.

In her essay, "Memoir, Autobiography, Testimonio," Norma E. Cantú describes the various category labels of biographies, autobiographies, memoirs, testimonies, and autohistorias. Cantú also claims that in selecting the texts to be examined in her essay, she purposely chooses works written by professional Latino/a and Chicano/a writers as she thinks that this approach allows for the exploration "of autobiography, memoir, and testimonio as genres that constitute an important subsection of Latino/a literature" (311). However, the autobiographies, memoirs, and testimonies written by non-professional Latino/a and Chicano/a writers are also significant in that they can provide critical analysis of the strategic use of stereotype in the performance of Latinidad. Cantú explains how "contemporary [autobiographical] texts [can] chronicle the oppressive conditions for Latinos/as and Chicanos/as in the United States in the latter part of the twentieth century [and the beginning of the twenty-first century] as told by a subaltern voice" (315). These voices of subaltern subjects should include the voices of Latino/a performers because they describe the racial, ethnic, and cultural tensions in their life and work experiences in the entertainment industry, which is particularly in need of addressing equity and diversity concerns.

Also, Cantú names several sub-genres of life-writing within Latino/a literature: immigrant stories, gendered stories, "borderlands" writing, Chicano/a stories, and fictionalized autobiography.

These sub-genres can all apply to Latino/a performers' autobiographies. Many Latino/a performers have migrated/immigrated to the United States in order to seek the American dream of success. Moreover, Latino/a performers' autobiographies can speak to issues of gender and living in a "borderlands," as well as connect to other, larger stories within Chicano/a life-writing. Lastly, Latino/a performers' autobiographies provide a productive, real-life contrast regarding the political, social, and cultural tensions that affect the Latino/a community when considered alongside texts of the sub-genre of fictionalized autobiography in Latino/a and Chicano/a life-writing. Autobiographies written by Latino/a performers address strongly the central question of what does it mean to perform Latinidad? Granted, they approach this question as it applies to their roles for the screen and the stage, but the way they address this question affects how they see themselves and function as real but "othered" performers/actors who represent the Latino/a community. This dual approach to the question of performing Latinidad mirrors the fictional and real-life basis of stories in the sub-genre of fictionalized autobiography in Latino/a life-writing. In short, autobiographies of Latino/a performers deserve to be considered part of the overall genre of life-writing within Latino/a literature.

Additionally, I turn to the methodology utilized in José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* to further place Latino/a performers' autobiographies in relation to what has come in the past and what will be in the future within the Latino/a community and its literature. Muñoz describes his project: "At the center of *Cruising Utopia* there is the idea of hope, which is both a critical affect and a methodology. ... My approach to hope as a critical methodology can be best described as a backward glance that enacts a future vision" (4). Muñoz applies hope as a methodology in order to revive a sense of critical utopianism, which can combat the anti-relational bend of Queer Studies today (10-11).² But, I want to take Muñoz's idea of hope as a critical methodology that 'can best be described as a backward glance that enacts a future vision' and use it to analyze how Latino/a performers write about the stereotypical roles they are offered. I contend that recent autobiographies by Latino/a performers demonstrate a way for the readers/viewers to perceive hope as a critical methodology. These Latino/a performers, over the years, detail their frustrations and actions to rework Latino/a stereotypical roles. The subject matter of Latino/a stereotypical roles in these texts provides a stage for all to see the enactment of hope as a critical methodology and how it links the present to the past and the future.

In this essay, I argue that Latino/a performers' autobiographical works, specifically Rita Moreno's *Rita Moreno: A Memoir*, Rosita Perez's *Handbook For An Unpredictable Life: How I Survived Sister Renata and My Crazy Mother, and Still Came Out Smiling (With Great Hair)*, and John Leguizamo's *Pimps, Hos, Playa Hatas, and All the Rest of My Hollywood Friends*, demonstrate recognition and hopeful strategic use of Latino/a stereotypes in order to establish a trajectory of the utilization and reformation of stereotypes for Latino/a

performers. The way these Latino/a performers chronicle and negotiate the question of stereotypical casting reflects their struggle to represent accurately their community within larger society. This dual focus on the individual and community in Latino/a performers' autobiographies is an interesting distinction. It provides a useful contrast with traditional white male autobiography, the most famous American example being *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, which focuses solely on the exceptional individual. These texts strengthen the knowledge-base of the life-writing genre of Latino/a literature. I examine the roles Moreno was offered and her inability to refuse said roles and still work (with the singular exception of her role as Googie Gomez) to establish a baseline history of Latino/a stereotypes in Hollywood. Then I move to an analysis of how Perez handled overt Latino/a stereotypical roles. The end of her book and the majority of Leguizamo's work highlight the need for Latino/a performers to negotiate the stereotypical roles that they are offered to sustain their individual careers yet put forth honest portrayals of their home communities. These performers have been struggling with the stereotypical roles that they enact and have realized the necessity of writing and producing their own work and reformulating stereotypes into prototypes, which John Leguizamo defines as the building blocks of comic theatre. In this way, lives and experiences of Latino/a individuals and the Latino/a community overall are validated in the past and present, both in real-life and on the stage.

From Rosita Dolores Alverio to Rita Moreno

Rita Moreno's first movie role is as Dolores Guerrero in *So Young, So Bad*. This role is not a Latina stereotype. Dolores Guerrero is no smoldering sexy spitfire; Moreno describes her as a soft, sweet, 'plaintive' character, who is prone to crying and playing solitary songs on her guitar (79-80).³ She asserts that Dolores Guerrero's ethnicity is "exaggerated in a positive way" in that her "screen family—so generically ethnic they seem to be of every nationality" appear jovial and festive as they arrive to visit her in jail with food and song (80). After MGM signs Rita Moreno as its Latina Elizabeth Taylor, she acquires two other roles in *The Toast of New Orleans* (set within New Orleans' Cajun community) and *Pagan Love Song* (set within Tahiti). Moreno states, "In both pictures, I play 'cute' ethnics and employ my newly invented 'universal ethnic accent,' which is a coy pidgin English of no discernible authentic origin" (92). Later, she expands on this implicit self-critique: "However, now when I reconsider the film, I am a bit embarrassed by the disrespect it shows to Tahitians. Nineteen fifty was a different time, and it was routine to show such blatant disregard for native people, who were treated in this film with a celebratory condescension. ... I am afraid that I embodied every cliché of the coy, childlike Polynesian as Terru" (95). Moreno easily labels the stereotypical aspects of playing a native person from Tahiti but could not articulate a critique of the subtler ethnic stereotype attributes in the role of Dolores Guerrero in *So*

Young, So Bad. Admittedly, this critique for Moreno is only possible in hindsight and not at the time when she was playing these roles. She writes, "Did any of this strike me at the time as racial stereotyping? I was eighteen, wearing a sarong and ensconced on a tropical island set with stars on location in Hawaii. What do you think?" (96). The luxury of being a part of the film industry, along with Moreno's youth and inexperience, kept her from making a thorough analysis of the ethnic and racial stereotypes at hand.

Furthermore, the necessity of earning a paycheck prevents Moreno from taking issue with the roles she is offered. She explains, "To work, I had to jump into deep schlock, and this was the era of the worst of my Lolita/Conchita Hispanic spitfires in low-cut blouses and dangling hoop earrings. I would do whatever it took—take whatever job—if it kept me among 'the stars'" (106).⁴ Here is where the strategic use of the Latino/a stereotype begins: in the Latina performer's basic quest of earning a livelihood and keeping the prospects of future success alive for herself and her community. Moreno banks on her ethnic appeal and does not fail. Her roles ranged from the Latina spitfire to Native American and Arab maidens and slave girls. Part of this job security results from the gender and sexual stereotypes in play as well as ethnic and racial stereotypes: "As I look back on my Indian maiden period, I can see that the films also all had a barely veiled sexist slant: that girls should be captured, writhing, and either enjoy submitting or kick till the bitter end" (111). Gender and sexual stereotypes of the woman who wanted to submit herself to her man's every desire are in circulation at this time and provide another overlay to the ethnic and racial stereotypes inherent within movie roles. Moreno had no choice but to accept these roles, especially if she wanted to be successful. She explains, "Besides, during much of my young screen life in Hollywood, there was no other way for me to go than for those sexy, ethnic roles. If I didn't want to do that, if I wanted to concentrate on principles rather than on getting work, I would never have made another film, and I never would have been on television. You played the game however you could" (152). There is no other way to stay vital in the industry than to make strategic and necessary use of the ethnic, racial, and even gender and sexual stereotypes; principles were negotiated in playing the game. Not even being an award-winning actress makes a difference for Moreno.

The role of Anita in *West Side Story* proves to be of immeasurable significance for Rita Moreno for it gives her the chance to play "the epitome of the great ethnic role" (183). While Moreno had been bombarded with her fair share of Lolita and Conchita roles in her young career, she jumps at the chance to play Anita because this character "was Puerto Rican, and she was fighting for her rights. She had plenty to say about what was wrong in America—and in the world" (183). The role seemed tailored to Rita Moreno as her story of being a recent arrival from Puerto Rico and living in New York City was Anita's story as well. Yet, limited racial imagining and understanding was evident in the make-up and casting of the movie.⁵ Despite these issues, Moreno excelled in the role of Anita

and won an Oscar for Best Supporting Actress in a Film. Based on a friend's report, Moreno describes the reception of her Oscar win by her community: "[T]here was a sacred silence in El Barrio—Spanish Harlem... My people were holding their collective breath. And what an outcry when I won! People were literally hanging out their windows, yelling, 'She won! She won! She did it!' What they were really saying was 'We won!'" (192). Rita Moreno was the first Latina to win an Oscar, a notable achievement for herself and her community. At this moment, the autobiography of Rita Moreno is both about the individual and the community much like the autobiographies by Perez and Leguizamo. But, the winning of the Oscar procured no big Hollywood roles for her. Moreno found herself more type-cast than ever: "It might have been because I had played a definitive Hispanic role that I was being offered only parts in gang movies and B movies...I took some of those parts because I needed the work" (202). She has to continue making strategic use of the Latina stereotype in the roles offered to her. One such key strategic creation and use is the character of Googie Gomez.

Googie Gomez was a character that Moreno created during her recreational time with her show-business colleagues. One night at a party, the host James Coco implores, "Rita, do that crazy Latina woman for Terry" (240), and Moreno enacts her character for the playwright, Terrence McNally, who is so impressed by the performance that he writes Googie Gomez into his play *The Ritz*. But, who was Googie Gomez? Rita Moreno explains, "She was *the worst* Hispanic cabaret singer of all time. Her gestures were operatic, her eyelashes were a mile long, and her makeup was applied with a trowel. ... Finally, though, it was Googie's mispronounced English—which I owe to Mami—that placed her in the Terrible Performer Hall of Fame" (241). The character of Googie Gomez presents an alternative stereotype of the Latina alongside the hot-blooded spitfires and the passive virginal beauties, which date back to the 1920s in Hollywood. Richie Pérez explicates, "Early films projected one additional stereotype of Latin women: the frivolous Latina whose accent and actions were meant to be laughed at" (151). Pérez invokes Carmen Miranda, analyzing how such a role turned Latin American women into silly but erotic performing dolls.

However, Moreno's creation and execution of this role was over-the-top for the ultimate purpose of critique. According to Mary C. Beltrán, "Googie Gomez is a caricature who constantly calls attention to her own outrageousness and thus to the absurdity of the societal assumptions on which such characters are based. ... From these beginnings, the role of Googie Gomez was a perfect showpiece for Moreno's talents and one which she was able to help craft" (83). The creation of Googie seemed to fit particular needs of Moreno that stem from her career experiences and articulated a hard-to-word critique of how Latina stereotypes work in Hollywood. In an interview with Shaun Considine of *The New York Times*, Rita Moreno confirms her critical use of Googie Gomez: "By playing Googie, I am thumbing my nose at all those Hollywood writers responsible for lines like, 'You Yankee peeg, you rape my seester, I keel you!' Those

writers were *serious* and Terrence is not. All the characters in *The Ritz* are caricatures and that's how I play Googie, outrageously!" (Beltrán 83). Moreno performs this role with the intention of demonstrating its insulting artificiality, and does it so well that she wins the Tony for her role in *The Ritz* in 1975. Her "appeal in and apparent enjoyment playing the role of Googie Gomez serves as a vivid illustration of the power of satire, when accompanied by creative agency, to begin to lessen the power of Latina/o stereotypes" (Beltrán 83). What Moreno achieves with Googie Gomez anticipates Rosie Perez and John Leguizamo's moves to write and produce works of their choice and resonates with Leguizamo's bid to rework stereotypes in the interests of the individual performer and the Latino/a community; it only differs in its singular iteration and parodic intent.

In the end, the role of Googie Gomez "highlight[s] shifting [racial] paradigms of Latina/o representation by the 1970s" and "Rita Moreno's creative agency in the character's development is instructional also regarding the importance and impact of Latina/o creative control in the construction of Hollywood portrayals of Latinidad and promotion of Latina and Latino stars" (Beltrán 65). By the 1970s, patterns in role creation and casting are changing in Hollywood; however, that does not mean that actresses like Rita Moreno had problem-free careers. Moreno tells of how when she was sixty, her agent set up an audition for her with a famous director, which would be an honor except the audition was to play a Mexican whorehouse madam who speaks only two lines of Spanish in the whole movie (270). The readers can see that the Latina stereotype does not evolve so much as age from the 'smoldering sexy spitfire' to 'whorehouse madam.' Nonetheless, Rita Moreno's career shows that while ethnic, racial, gender, and ageist stereotypes are pervasive, they cannot impede success. In her autobiography, Rosie Perez shows a similar awareness and tenacity about the roles offered to her.

Rosie Perez's Version of Doing the Right Thing

The last third of Rosie Perez's *Handbook For An Unpredictable Life: How I Survived Sister Renata and My Crazy Mother, and Still Came Out Smiling (With Great Hair)* addresses how she handles ethnic, racialized, and gendered stereotypes of Latina roles and describes the evolution of her performance career, which starts with dance clubs in Los Angeles. This is where an eighteen-year old Perez and her friends were recruited to be dancers in an episode of *Soul Train*. When dancing for Don Cornelius before getting picked to be featured on an episode, Perez received her first lesson about what it would take to have a successful career as a performer: "When I started to speak on the first take, Don Cornelius gave me an incredulous look regarding my accent. I lessened it; he gave me a nod of approval. Instantly, I felt ashamed. I had made my first conscious effort not to sound ethnic" (217). Where Moreno described perfecting her 'generic ethnic accent' in order to keep being cast in 'exotic' roles, Perez describes lessening her accent in order to get screen

time; furthermore, Perez describes herself as instantly ashamed, whereas Moreno can only register similar feelings in hindsight.

Rosie Perez's performance on *Soul Train* jump-starts her performance career, and she lands an audition for the casting director of *Do the Right Thing*. Reading for this movie proved meaningful for Perez. She recalls, "I knew immediately after reading the script that the film was going to have big political ramifications, that it was going to ruffle a few feathers, and that excited me" (234-235). This movie does offer an intense meditation on the utilization of the racial caste system in the United States; one specific unsettling feature about it is the stereotypical construction of Rosie Perez's character. Perez plays Tina, a single Latina mother who lives with her child and judgmental mother and nags the father of her son, Spike Lee's character, about time and money. Yet, Rosie Perez makes no mention of these more salient points concerning the ethnic, racial, and gender stereotypes involved in the character of Tina. Again, this moment echoes Moreno's lack of critical reflection when describing the role of Dolores Guerrero in *So Young, So Bad*. Perez displays critical evaluation when she feels shame for inhibiting her accent on *Soul Train* but not in reflecting on the role of Tina in *Do the Right Thing*. Her evaluative abilities are inhibited more than likely by the greater prestige of the film industry and her belief that *Do the Right Thing* was going to be a critical success. Perez further describes how she wanted to have a chance at auditioning for different roles, but her agent at the time gave her problematic advice: "She further suggested that I try to sound less ethnic. 'Yes, that, and, well, if you change your hair color, maybe a little nip.' 'You mean look less ethnic, too? She shrugged her shoulders, 'Everyone does it'" (251). Even with the best of intentions, Perez had an uphill battle in getting to perform less stereotypical Latina roles, but she did achieve some success. Compared to Moreno, Perez more quickly moves from the strategic use of the stereotype to an active fight against said roles and a rewriting of them. Perez is in a better position to "do the right thing" herself.

The next notable film Perez did was *White Men Can't Jump*, and her recollections of the audition process for this film speak to the hard work necessary in changing stereotypical casting and role-creation. From the start, Perez lobbied to audition for the role opposite Woody Harrelson: "I fought like hell to be seen for *White Men Can't Jump*. They wanted an Italian American or Irish American girl. It was tough, even for CAA, to get me an audition, but they pulled it off! I was the only girl of color in the waiting room. Four A-list actresses sat there, artificially confident" (272). The description here verifies how studios get set in their ideas about how to cast a film for financial success, i.e. in a way that assures mainstream audiences will pay money to go see it. At the time, the studio's prejudices about who to cast for financial success were valid as neither Perez nor any other Latina actress at the time was a bankable film star. This is the period between the eras of Carmen Miranda and Jennifer Lopez. Accordingly, securing the role was not easy even though Perez had support; she writes, "I went through several callbacks. The studio, as I

was told, had a problem that I was Puerto Rican; they were worried about the interracial aspect. Here we go. Woody and Ron fought for me, as did the producers. And I finally got the part!... That's the only way things change—when everyone joins the fight and you're not the only one rushing up the hill" (273). Perez's comments emphasize not only how many sectors of the film industry need to be involved to revise the practices of stereotypical role-creation and casting but also show implicitly how this effort must go beyond the Latino/a members of the industry. The responsibility for a just and realistic depiction of the Latino/a community and society rests not only with Latinas/as, since a majority of Hollywood producers, directors, and writers are Anglo.⁶ For Perez, *White Men Can't Jump* was a success, which led to her most successful film venture.

Getting cast in *Fearless* was just as arduous as getting cast in *White Men Can't Jump*. Again, Perez's agents had to fight hard for her to get an audition. Perez recounts: "*Fearless* was a long shot too, especially since they wanted an Italian American for the role even though the real-life person the character was based on was Asian-American, a survivor who lost her baby in a major plane crash that they both were on" (277). The reader can note here how there is still an attempt at type-casting going on that is based on an idealization of the actual survivor in question; there is no insistence on a consistent portrayal of the real Asian-American woman who lost her baby in the plane crash. Instead, there seems to be a desire to cast the role with a race/ethnicity that the mainstream audience will pay to see in the theatres. At the conclusion of her audition, Perez explains the mixed messages she received about her reading: "I mean, I did think I read well, but I didn't believe that he [film director] liked me, because he asked me about my nationality and background" (278). Despite box office success and critical praise, questions of nationality/background, as they pertain to the practice of type-casting, go hand-in-hand with stereotypical roles as problems that plague the career of any ethnic/raced performer, especially Latinas/as. Regardless, Perez got the role and performed so well that she received an Oscar nomination for Best Supporting Actress. Although Perez did not win the Oscar that year, her performance and the reception it received were memorable.

Rosie Perez closes her autobiography by mentioning her continued quest to act in non-stereotypical Latina roles. She writes, "I would still be offered stereotyped roles, and I still turned them down. But I could wake up each morning and look at myself in the mirror and get respect. I did independent films that I felt proud of, and became proactive and produced two projects for HBO, *Society's Ride* and *Subway Stories*, along with a movie, *The 24-Hour Woman*" (303). Her focus on independent projects and her choice to produce projects for major cable channels is perhaps the next stage in the trajectory of making necessary and strategic use of Latino/a stereotypes for the Latino/a performer: writing and producing works of one's choice. This move to write one's own character was seen with Moreno's creation of Googie Gomez. Such an effort can revise Latino/a stereotypes. Contemporary Latino/a performers such as

Rosie Perez and John Leguizamo have a greater ability to conceive of this possibility.

John Leguizamo's Prototype Quest

Early in *Pimps, Hos, Playa Hatas, and All the Rest of My Hollywood Friends*, John Leguizamo states an awareness of being part of a Latino/a performer legacy and stresses a need to write and produce his own work in order to reshape Latino/a stereotypes, which is reflected consistently in his one-man shows. He describes, "It's all about what comes with the fame and fortune—power. The power to control my own destiny, the clout to shape my own career. Being in a position to create work for a lot of other Latin artists. ... I know it isn't all my doing. I'm standing on the shoulders of a lot of Latin brothers and sisters who came before me—which is good, cuz I ain't that tall" (6). Leguizamo explains how he owes where he is in his career and what he can do to the long line of Latino/a performers who came before him, and also that the power he has to develop opportunities is something that he owes to himself and other Latino/a performers. It is this "debt" to those who came before him and to those who surround him now that prompts Leguizamo to wrestle with the stereotypical Latino roles that he is offered. He writes,

We were like this invisible race in America—like our aspirations, our experiences, our contributions to America didn't count. Nobody was documenting us. ... I felt a longing to create some kind of legacy, a memory about surviving, about people who made it against the odds. If you're a minority in this country and you want to see your people accurately documented, it's a do-it-yourself project. (76)

A community's need to be documented, and its duty to do so is telling. John Leguizamo takes on this responsibility in his larger body of work. But it is not easy work as he later details the difficulties in separating and choosing the positive versus the negative stereotypes for Latino/a performers.

Specifically, the art of nuance can be lost in the quest for political-correctness. Leguizamo does not want "to fall into the trap some minority writers do, of trying to counter the ridiculous negative stereotypes with ridiculously positive stereotypes" (76). He wants to write complex and flawed characters: "I wanted to create real Latin people, a gallery of characters, good and bad, strong and weak, warts and all. Of course, they had to be 'real' within a comic context, so they had to be kind of broad. But they weren't stereotypes. They were prototypes. Prototypes are the foundation of comic theater" (76-77). These broad, accessible characters who are composed of both strong and weak attributes are at the heart of John Leguizamo's one-man-shows, including *Mambo Mouth*, *Spic-O-Rama*, *Sexaholix*, and *Freak*. They are what make his work engaging, and it is interesting to read how he conceives of these characters as

realistic in that the viewer must accept the bad with the good. What matters is not only the entertainment value of his characters but the realistic portrait of a community that they can compose. Though his approach to stereotypes in the Latino/a community is reasonable, Leguizamo has to defend repeatedly the creation of his characters.

During the successful production of *Mambo Mouth*, John Leguizamo received highly-charged publicity, which was interestingly controversial, often along ethnic lines, concerning his show. *The New York Times* critically praised this production and gave column space to Leguizamo so he could detail some of his thoughts about what it means to be Latino artist. In his autobiography, Leguizamo quotes from the beginning of this article to explain how the Latino performer of his day, after being exposed to very few cultural and media icons in the Latino community, still has few options to choose from when it comes to acting roles; the Latino actor can only make a living by playing to type, which in his case means acting as the drug dealer in the *Miami Vice*-esque shows.⁷ Interestingly, he moves from this description to forecast a Latino/a future:

Anyway, I went on to say that things were changing. There were more and more Latinos in the country, and we weren't going to keep playing to the stereotypes—we were gonna start telling our own stories our own way. We weren't going to totally assimilate, the way some previous immigrant cultures had done. We weren't going to quietly melt in the pot. Instead, I predicted we were going to "co-assimilate." And one day the country would 'come to understand and respect' us. ... We're not just blending into the soup, we're changing it as much as it changes us. (84-85)

In this brave, new Latino/a future, stereotypes will be rejected, and Latino/a community members will be telling their own stories in their own way. Assimilation, as achieved in previous generations, will no longer be the norm in terms of cultural integration. What Leguizamo describes is the process of how Latino/a culture and American culture are transformed "equally" by their engagement with one another, resulting in a new type of "American" cultural experience. This is a large claim to make about the Latino/a community in the United States. Notably, Leguizamo asserts that the fifteen years that had passed from when he stated these ideas in *The New York Times* article to the publication of his autobiography had proven his predictions correct. Of course, if this claim is to be believed, it did not happen without the effort of cultural workers like John Leguizamo.

With the production of Leguizamo's then new project, *Spic-O-Rama*, the cultural and political work of re-shaping Latino/a stereotypes reached a notable moment when it addressed the root word of *Spic-O-Rama*. Leguizamo recounts how critics and many segments of the public rejected use of the term "spic" and criticized him for such prominent use of this word in his production.⁸ Never-

theless, Leguizamo describes his use of "spic" in this work as an active community reclamation of the word: "And that's what I was up to. I'm a spic? Fine. I'm a spic. I'm spic-tacular. And my show is *Spic-O-Rama*. Spicspicspicspic" (115). He sees this production very much doing the same work as cultural productions and artifacts from other underrepresented communities that set out to reclaim words and phrases that pertain to their communities and are used often in a pejorative manner.⁹ He defends the characters he draws in *Spic-O-Rama*:

But there are no stereotypes in either *Mambo Mouth* or *Spic-O-Rama*. There's no *Miami Vice* villains, no drug lords, no two-dimensional Latin doorman or gardener. These people are three-dimensional characters. They've got depth and feeling. They've got whole characters and lives that you learn in the show. Stereotypes repeat common, usually false and demeaning generalities. These people are brand-new and whole. (115)

These prototype characters, with good and bad attributes, are the Latino/a characters that Leguizamo creates in his work both for the sake of comedy and verisimilitude. This reclaiming of the word "spic" and the creation of these prototype roles is in line with what other Hispanic and Latino/a autobiographers have done in the past.

In analyzing early twentieth-century autobiographies written by Mexican-American women and how they critiqued indigenous people at the time, Sonja Z. Pérez writes that these women writers took part in a process that she labels as "participatory resistance," which entails the simultaneous participation in and resistance to Anglo-American domination (288). Perhaps the best way to see John Leguizamo's work is to see it in line with this history of participatory resistance. In using the word "spic" and in creating real but broadly drawn characters in his productions, Leguizamo both participates in Anglo-American domination through the utilization of some common terms and stereotypical ideas associated with the Latino/a community, but he also resists Anglo-American domination in that his ultimate goal is reclamation of these terms and ideas to work for rather than against the Latino/a community. This is a more complex task than combatting a history of negative stereotypes with the representation of inaccessible and sometimes "over-the-top" positive stereotypes (116).

For example, there is *Empire* and its main character of Victor Rosa, which Leguizamo describes:

Victor is this ambitious, driven guy who, because he's in the ghetto, turns to drug dealing as the most viable route to success. *Empire* raises the legitimate question of who's the bigger criminal and has the worst impact on society—the drug dealer in the Bronx who turns to crime because of his environment, or the Wall Street scam artist who rips people off for zillions because he can? (240)

Now, the readers and viewers can see the critical verve of participatory resistance. Though the character of Victor Rosa may present as a stereotypical Latino role, he lends his story to a larger and more important conversation about how society functions, in regard to the question of white-collar versus blue-collar crime. Pertaining to the reception of *Empire*, John Leguizamo details:

Empire was written and directed by a Latin man, produced by and featuring lots of Latins. And there's a certain segment of any minority community, usually the intelligentsia, who expect you to project only positive images of *la raza*. Like they think phony, all-positive stereotypes will cancel out the negative stereotypes. But it doesn't work that way. Stereotypes are stereotypes, and the truth is the truth. *Empire* has a lot of truth in it. I'm proud of it. (241)

The desire for the presentation of positive roles can be so strong, it outweighs the cultural and communal good that this film offers in that it employed many Latinos/as in the film industry and it lent itself to a larger discussion of the perpetuation of structural systems of injustice. Moreover, the questions implied by Leguizamo's final comments deserve attention: is the "truth" always so separate and distinct from the "stereotype"? Or is the relationship between the two far stickier and messier than we would care to admit? Is *Empire* such a success because it starts off with the stereotypical Latino role of the drug dealer but then gives socio-cultural and historical contexts that make the role and the movie more significant? The value of Latino/a roles and projects involved in participatory resistance resides here: to not only present these truthful depictions but to pose questions and employ under-represented populations in the film industry. This move of participatory resistance is another stage in the trajectory of making necessary and strategic use of the Latino/a stereotypes process. Ultimately, all three autobiographies of these Latino/a performers show an evolution of consciousness when it comes to stereotypical Latino/a roles and projects that is inclusive of its address of the individual performer and his/her community.

Wholeness for the Individual and the Community

In her examination of three other Latina autobiographies, Lourdes Torres addresses how they are radical works "because they are about producing a consciousness and a movement which does not insist on their fragmentation" (285). This assertion can characterize the autobiographies of these Latino/a performers. These works are well-situated to discuss the creation of a consciousness that stresses wholeness over fragmentation, as they detail performers' efforts to write, enact, direct, and produce realistic characters in the interests of themselves and their home communities. These autobiographies are very pre-occupied with the questions of performing wholeness and identity as they pertain to characters and communities; roles

do not have to be fragmented or a stagnant choice between positive or negative Latino/a stereotypes. Autobiographies by Latino/a performers illuminate how the construction of selves or realistic/truthful roles is an evolving quest for these performers, who undertake it from all possible perspectives. All of these topics are relevant in the life-writing category of Latino/a literature. John Leguizamo summarizes this idea best when he comments on his film *Unde-feated*: "Whatever else people think of it, I'm proud that *Unde-feated* succeeds in showing that Latin people aren't all just about ghetto stories. We can be successful. Because if you're Latin, you can't just be *good*-you gotta be ridiculously entertaining. You basically gotta do it all yourself. Write it, direct it, produce it, cater it, watch it, pay admission, and like it" (255). *Unde-feated* is a film about the bargains a young Latino boxer from Jackson Heights, Queens makes in order to be successful. Leguizamo wrote, directed, produced, and starred in this movie. Because of this fact, this film gives him a great sense of pride and integrity. Except for the boxing angle, this could be Leguizamo's own life-story. It is this sense of wholeness evident for Leguizamo that resonates with the idea of Latino/a performers' autobiographies resisting fragmentation in the interests of the individual performer and his/her community.

José Esteban Muñoz closes his introduction to *Cruising Utopia* by stressing the utilization of a critical lens "that is attentive to the past, for the purpose of critiquing a present" (18) and creating an enhanced future. Such a lens promotes use of the imagination. According to Muñoz, his book "asks one to cruise the fields of the visual and not so visual in an effort to see in the anticipatory illumination of the utopian" (18). John Leguizamo approximates these ideas the best in his autobiography. He states a clear acknowledgment of being part of a Latino/a performer legacy, in what he owes to those who have come before him and to those who will come after him. Leguizamo makes this realization by way of demanding, from himself, as a performer and writer, and his community, something more than just a turn to over-the-top positive stereotypical Latino/a roles as a way to combat negative stereotypical Latino/a roles. He uses his imagination to create more real but still broad, accessible Latino/a roles, and asks that others do the same in order to achieve just representations of the Latino/a community, a type of utopia in the visual arts world of the film and television industry. Rosie Perez approaches this realization as her autobiography ends on a note of career satisfaction when she continues to turn down the stereotypical Latina roles she is offered but opts to act in independent films and produce work she chooses. Finally, with Rita Moreno, the readers see how crucial a factor historical context is in analyzing the longevity of the Latino/a stereotypical role for the performer and the larger community. For much of her career, Moreno was not in a time or place to realize the lack of imagination inherent in many of her roles and do something about it with the exception of the role of Googie Gomez; such critique is only possible in hindsight. But the value of all three autobiographies for Latino/a literature is how they feature subaltern voices documenting attempts at whole-

ness in identity for themselves as individuals and their community by describing oppressive political, cultural, and social conditions that Latinos/as confronted in the past and present, both in real life and on the stage. Such attempts allow hope to be used as a criti-

cal methodology that structures a chronology of aging, ailing, and hopefully dying Latino/a stereotypes in the entertainment industry and Latino/a literature. May the future realize a utopia where Latino/a roles, lives, and art are concerned.

ENDNOTES

¹ Norma Cantú writes about how there can be slippery categorization when deciding to apply the terms "autobiography," "memoir," and "testimonio;" consequently, she decides to use all of these terms interchangeably within the larger genre label of "life-writing" (311). Adhering to this idea, I still opt for the term "autobiography" when discussing these works, as it is a term more widely-known and understood to mean one writing his/her life-story.

² According to Muñoz, antirelationality comes from Leo Bersani's book, *Homos* (1996), which defines homosexual desire as entailing a revolutionary state of incompatibility with sociality in today's world. The antirelational bend of Queer Studies replaces "the romance of community with the romance of singularity and negativity" (Muñoz 10). Muñoz disagrees with antirelationality and argues that such a conception of queerness views sexuality as a dangerously pure identity category, one devoid of necessary intersections with race, class, and gender.

³For the purpose of brevity, in-text citations and paraphrases from the three Latino/a autobiographies will be cited by page number only.

⁴ Regarding identity-labels, the author of this essay prefers to use "Latino/a" but will quote and use "Hispanic" and "Latin" when found in the source material.

⁵ Moreno provides more details about the offensive stereotypical and homogenous make-up for the Sharks and casting practices (Natalie Wood as Maria) that took place during the filming of *West Side Story* (187).

⁶It bears emphasizing how Hollywood in its award season of 2016 was mired famously in these issues in the Oscars-So-White controversy.

⁷The reader of this essay should note how Leguizamo's description of the limited role offerings for contemporary Latino/a actors echo Moreno's description of acting opportunities for Latino/a actors in her autobiography.

⁸ Moreno explains how her own traumatic memories of being called a "spic" as a young girl fuel her desire to play the role of "Anita," a strong and vocal Puerto Rican woman, in *West Side Story* (183).

⁹ Similar actions include attempts at reclaiming the "n-word" by the African-American community and the more universally-accepted reclamation of the label "queer" by the LGBTQIA+ community.

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