

RACIALIZING THE PUERTO RICAN DAY PARADE: RECENT MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF U.S. PUERTO RICANS IN THE PUBLIC SPACE

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“It was a joyous occasion and a vibrant parade, with drum majorettes dressed like Middle Americans but moving to syncopated Caribbean rhythms exemplifying the mix of North and Latin American that is today’s “Nuyoricans,” or New York Ricans. As the marchers made their way up Fifth Avenue past Rockefeller Center, little girls in red, white, and blue waved Puerto Rican flags from their fathers’ shoulders in time to the salsa beat. ‘We are here to show our pride in being Puerto Rican and to celebrate our culture,’ one man in the crowd explained as others nodded in agreement. ‘We are both Americans and Puerto Ricans.’” (Winn, 579)

This description of the Puerto Rican Day Parade in New York evinces the positive value of cultural reaffirmation that this collective performative ritual possesses for Puerto Ricans in the diaspora. The public performativity of Puerto Rican identity, which began on April 15, 1956 as the Desfile Hispano, has been developing as a social and public institution in NYC for more than forty years. Throughout the history of its organization and planning, the Parade has been characterized by tensions between paradigms of hispanismo and puertorriqueñismo, that is, between integration and a reaffirmation of cultural difference. It also embodies the simultaneous articulations of Puerto Ricans as both an ethnic group and as a nation. However, whether through integration, difference, or both, the main objective of this collective ritual has been to inscribe the presence of the Puerto Rican subject in the U.S. public space and to institutionalize our visibility and our agency as historical minorities in U.S. dominant society.

Yet, after almost half a century of such collective efforts, the Puerto Rican Day Parade in New York has been the object of a racializing

discourse in the media, particularly on television. In the last three years, this major cultural event has been used as the background for two television shows, Seinfeld and Law and Order. In the next to the last episode of the Seinfeld series, aired in May, 1998, Puerto Ricans are represented as a mob when they respond to Kramer, who accidentally burns the Puerto Rican flag and stomps on it to put out the fire. In June 11, 2000, after the successful completion of the Puerto Rican Day Parade in New York, a group of men sexually attacked more than fifty women passerbys in what has been now named the Central Park wildings. This event, in turn, was associated with the Parade, with the Puerto Rican community, and with Puerto Rican masculinity in particular, triggering a series of discursive associations in television, newspapers, and the Internet that metonymically linked the Parade with sexual violence, with mobs, and with criminality. On January 24, 2001, NBC aired a Law and Order episode based on the events of June 11. Titled "Sunday in the Park with Jorge", the narrative criminalizes young Puerto Rican men, representing them as a collectivity of savages outside of the order of civilization. It establishes an underlying logic and binary that situates whites as the embodiments of Reason and men of color (read Puerto Rican men) as its absence, as irrationality and barbarism. These representations, together, have created a chain of images and associations in the U.S. popular imaginary that has re-circulated the public image of U.S. Puerto Ricans --and the Puerto Rican male—as an internal enemy, as an alien savage (Valle) who challenges the forces of law and order and that is a menace to the white, middle-class sector. In this paper, I will trace the discourses of race and gender that have been evoked by these two programs and by the debates and discussions around the Central Park attacks, focusing on the ideologies behind them, on their function on this particular historical moment, and on the social effects that this process of racialization has had, or could have, on both the dominant society and the U.S. Puerto Rican subject.

This criminalization of U.S. Puerto Ricans needs to be understood in the larger context of the demographic shifts of U.S. Latinos and the current urban politics of space, containment and transgression that are emerging throughout major urban centers that are, not coincidentally, also major Latino cities. Moreover, the common deployment of the term "mob" in reference to Puerto Ricans across

these three dominant discursive texts clearly suggests that these media representations are articulating a class and race-informed anxiety at, and fear for the supposedly transgressive presence of collective bodies of color in U.S. dominant public spaces. Yet, gender also plays a major mediating role in this process of racialization. Triggered by the media representations of the Central Park wildings, the criminalization of Puerto Rican or “brown” masculinity is itself the result of a constructed narrative about brown/Puerto Rican men attacking white women, a narrative that disturbingly echoes the logic of lynching in the South during post-Emancipation and that informs, in turn, the fictional narrative of the Law and Order episode.

This racializing discourse is also one current manifestation of a long history of Western thought in which the definitions of Reason and of rationality are themselves embedded in racist logics of differentiation and subordination. (Goldberg) This case study brings to the surface what David Theo Goldberg has called “the sedimented significations” (162) of the social constructs of the primitive and of savagery. Rather than trace or historicize said constructs, it is more important to ask ourselves why are these European, racist constructs and images being deployed at this particular historical, cultural and political juncture in the United States? During the 1990s, for instance, in Los Angeles and in California, Mexican documented and undocumented immigrants (particularly women) were targets of this racializing construct as a result of the anti-immigration policy spearheaded by Pete Wilson. At the turn of the 21st century, the Puerto Rican community in the United States has become a more established migrant and ethnic group in the East Coast as a result of a structural differentiation with more recent immigrants, such as the Dominicans, the Colombians, and the Mexicans. Yet while in the past the racialization of immigrants would subside as they integrated themselves economically, socially and culturally to the mainstream, in this case this is not the pattern. While more recent immigrants are traditionally the target for these negative social constructions, the U.S. Puerto Rican sector, and most specifically the Puerto Rican male, continues to be racialized and criminalized by dominant discourses despite our historical presence, our economic, social and cultural contributions to the U.S., our emerging middle-class and professional sector, and the media-constructed hypervisibility of the

Latin boom. The U.S. Puerto Rican continues to be seen as a Racial Other who needs to be contained, supervised, and controlled by the State and its institutions. This re-racializing (although the prefix “re” may suggest that the racialization stopped in the past, I use it to foreground its renewed circulation in the public space) points to the fear held by a non-minority, U.S. middle-class sector who struggles to maintain power as a visible body politic in the major urban centers but is threatened by the emerging numbers and demographic shifts of U.S. Latinos, shifts that are becoming much more evident in the growing visibility of brown bodies in the public space.

For every discourse, there is a counter-discourse. Thus, as the Puerto Rican Day Parade reminds dominant society, and Puerto Ricans alike, of a long, historical presence in the United States and of our economic production and contributions to society at large -- whether through commercial floats, music, actors and actresses, school bands, and community organizations-- television and media attempt to counteract and contain the positive images of integration and visibility that Puerto Ricans reaffirm during the Puerto Rican Day Parade. Angelo Sánchez, a Puerto Rican businessman from Chicago, for instance, is well aware of these struggles for power. He asserted that “as a community, [we need to] think about what we need to do to change this image. Nobody’s going to do it for us. We have to do it ourselves.” (Méndez 2000) and the Puerto Rican Day Parade plays a major role in this process. Despite the hypervisibility of Latinos in the entertainment industry, itself a result of market forces and the other side of the coin of postcolonial representations –the colonized as the object of fixation and disavowal-- television in particular continues to circulate such egregious images and stereotypes in an ideological struggle for power that is further complicated by gendered notions about Latino masculinity.

II. THE PUERTO RICAN DAY PARADE AND THE ETHNO-NATION:

The current Puerto Rican Day Parade emerged out of the efforts of the Organización del Desfile Puertorriqueño, which began in the 1950s, together with other similar organizations such as the Congreso del Pueblo, in order to “develop community support for the working class and to reaffirm the need to confront the immediate socioeconomic problems faced by Puerto Ricans.” (Korrol, 226) The

symbolic, commercial and political dimensions of the current Parade have partially shifted from these original goals. The Puerto Rican Day Parade has been institutionalized as a major ethnic, public event in New York, exemplifying the State-sanctioned celebrations of ethnicity and cultural diversity and partaking in the multicultural politics of the City. However, it still can be understood as a performance of cultural and political opposition or contestation. If during the 1950s and 1960s the principal floats were subsidized by the social, hometown clubs of the Island and the diaspora, since the 1980s the Parade has been significantly commercialized. Floats announce commercial products and labels mediated by the presence of Puerto Rican and Latino/a actors and actresses, singers, salsa groups, rap, merengue and jibaro music, school bands, and politicians, from Puerto Rican aldermen to the NY City mayor and the Island governor. The visibility of the Parade, which is aired on television and through the internet, offers those invited to participate a higher level of cultural capital and social value; in turn, famous movie stars and personalities add to the social attraction of the Parade itself.

Yet the Parade marches through and politically traverses the most exclusive and rich sectors of New York City's elite and economic capital, thus subverting the power dynamics and socioeconomic divisions between white capital and the Boricua community in El Barrio. Culture as "performance" also depends on the circulation of cultural symbols and icons and on the production of meaning that these symbols trigger. For instance, the visual prominence of Puerto Rican flags—from large to small flags, as hats, bandanas or scarves, on t-shirts, and painted on bodies, faces, and as nails, or inscribed as shaved haircut—signals the serious ethos of nationalism and patriotism among Puerto Ricans in the diaspora. Although this value is articulated and mediated as a commercialized nationalism, it is also true that wearing the Puerto Rican flag on one's body, or "the use of T-shirts or other insignias on that day marks the body itself of the participants as Puerto Rican; it announces a collective identity by means of the symbolic value of certain images and the power of words." (La Fountain-Stokes, 44) On the one hand, the mobility of the bodies of boricuas, mestizos, speakers of Spanglish, Spanish and Puerto Rican English, the audible sounds and rhythms of salsa, merengue and rap, constitute a radical reaffirmation of the public and collective presence of our community, which continues to be

marginalized and subordinated despite our fashionable moment in the U.S. popular imaginary. This cultural reaffirmation is contestatory, for it depends on “the persistence of collective memory through restored behavior.” (Roach, 47) In other words, the Parade restores, re-enacts, and brings into the public presence alternative forms of knowledge and being based on the “knowledge of the body, on habits and customs” that are, themselves, subordinate knowledges (Roach, 47; Foucault, 79).

On the other hand, this ritual simultaneously evinces the efforts to incorporate the Puerto Rican subject into the dominant spaces and hegemonic institutions through a public assertion of traditional values. (For instance, the tradition of the Queen and the popularity of the Police who march in the Parade) While this incorporation is not necessarily expressed as assimilation, it does necessitate a sort of negotiation with the existing, dominant paradigms of ethnicity as a productive, acceptable alternative to the racialized, subordinated identities imposed on all Puerto Ricans. To make Puerto Ricans into an “ethnic group” is a benign way of entering the system that accepts the official paradigms of institutional multiculturalism. It is also a way of cleaning racialized images created by dominant society as well as the most radical, self-constructed boricua identities constructed from within the community. For instance, the decision to ban rap music by the Parade Organizing Committee after the Central Park attacks is a case in point. Rap music is associated with public, rowdy behavior, and as such the Parade organizers defined rap outside of the parameters of Puerto Rican tradition in an attempt to vindicate the clean image of Puerto Ricans as a traditional, ethnic group within the United States. By locating rap music outside “tradition”, the expressions of youth culture are then criminalized and situated on the margins of what is culturally acceptable.

This cultural and political dialectic between ethnicity and nation, between acceptability and reaffirmation of cultural difference and political oppositionality, has been evident throughout the history of the Puerto Rican Day Parade’s organization and planning. As Rosa Estades has written, since its beginning the Organización del Desfile Puertorriqueño advocated for a Puerto Rican Parade rather than a Desfile Hispano, thus signaling the tensions between articulating an acceptable, benign hispanismo or reaffirming boricua differential

identity through puertorriquenismo. Since the Puerto Rican identity has been historically racialized, some members or factions within these planning committees argued that the Hispano rubric would avoid the negative stigmas of the Puerto Rican label. “In their struggle to escape a minority position, they can thus reach and borrow prestige from some larger and more favored minority...” (Mills, et al, quoted in Estades). It is also significant that the individual responsible for first organizing these parades was a Spaniard professor from Columbia University, Jesús de Galíndez, whose interest was to celebrate the Hispanic legacy in the City. Yet since 1959, el Desfile Puertorriqueño was established as such and thus there is El Desfile de la Raza in October and the Parada Puertorriqueña in June. Since then, and through the early organizing efforts of the social, hometown clubs, the Puerto Rican Day Parade has grown in terms of social, cultural and political visibility as a major expression of our presence in the diaspora and the Island. Its integration to U.S. mainstream society is achieved economically as well as in the symbolic mass presence in the public space. The Parade generated in 1997 over 50 million dollars for the city and for its businesses. It included more than 100,000 participants and over 3 million spectators. (Smith Haj Group, 1998)

Rather than choosing ethnicity or nation, the Puerto Rican Day Parade integrates both paradigms of collective identity and social imaginaries. This doubled way of imagining ourselves is not exceptional to Puerto Ricans, but rather one of the strategies and results of our (post)colonial conditions, as Grosfoguel, Negrón-Muntaner and Georas have analyzed. If Puerto Ricans imagine ourselves as a nation by reclaiming a territory, the Island, (and in the struggle over Vieques), we also inscribe ourselves as an ethnic group within the United States, for we do not claim territory nor our own State apparatus (Grosfoguel et al, 17-19). While the statehood party from the Island refused to recognize Puerto Ricans as a nation during the congressional debates on the Young Bill –and Carlos Romero Barceló claimed that Puerto Ricans only constituted a community--, on the other hand it was Senator Luis Gutiérrez, from the Chicago diaspora, who argued in favor of Puerto Ricans as a nation. While it would be easy to think that the diaspora only claims ethnicity and the islanders nationality, the fact that U.S Puerto Rican senators such as Gutiérrez and Nydia Velázquez argued for our status as a nation

destabilizes such binaries. Similarly, the Puerto Rican Day Parade articulates both ethnicity and nationalism. It claims ethnicity in relation to the U.S. and City politics of multiculturalism, claiming a rightful space as an established, traditional ethnic group cleansed of racialized images (along with the Irish and Italian, for instance). Yet the strong, visual, symbolic and political reaffirmation of Boricua identity as an oppositional one continues to be clearly evident in the omnipresent icon of the flag and of its historical meanings of opposition and resistance, as well as in the diverse cultural performances included in the Parade.

III. SEINFELD AND THE RESIGNIFICATION OF THE PUERTO RICAN FLAG:

In May, 1998, the next to the last episode of Seinfeld caused a controversy among Latino and Puerto Rican audiences. The episode shows Seinfeld and his friends stuck in a traffic jam on Fifth Avenue, a nuisance caused, indeed, by the Puerto Rican Day Parade. At one point, Kramer accidentally sets a Puerto Rican flag on fire and, in order to put it out, he throws the flag on the sidewalk and stomps on it. A group of Puerto Ricans sees this, and one gay man shouts: "There is a man burning (or stepping on) our flag". Others around him react to this and run toward Kramer. Puerto Ricans, as a collectivity, are referred to as "a mob" whose out-of-control violence is associated with daily occurrences on the island. A previous statement regarding how "this happens everyday in Puerto Rico" is generalizable to the behavior of Puerto Ricans during the whole episode.

That Kramer accidentally set the flag on fire is not an arbitrary image, nor an exclusive strategy for characterization and humor. It serves as a metaphoric anticipation of the ways in which a Puerto Rican mob is constructed by the Anglo cultural gaze. Immediately after Kramer tries to put out the fire in the most politically incorrect way –by stepping on the flag--, the one voice is heard: "Someone is burning our flag", a claim that sparks the constructed collective and irrational violence of this particular mob. Like a tinderbox, Puerto Ricans as a group could explode at any moment given a specific trigger. Unlike the representation of other mobs or collective groups –such as union labor movements and strikes in which the collectivity needs to be warmed up onto action, and organized action usually-- this brown mob reacts irrationally at a

gesture that is justified artistically through the naturalization of humor and through the already established expectations of Kramer's behavior. While the nature of comedy and humor has been evoked to justify this particular episode –“its only entertainment” (Boyd)--, it is precisely comedy, as genre, and humor as discourse that frames Puerto Rican patriotism as irrelevant, not serious enough of an issue to warrant a responsible representation on the part of the show writers and producers.

In addition, the Seinfeld episode foregrounds the fragile nature of intercultural knowledge and the process of resignification that ensues from such a lack. As a cultural outsider, Kramer's relationship to the Puerto Rican flag –politically and in terms of identity-- is very different from the meanings that the flag holds for those Puerto Ricans who attended the Parade. The fact that the Puerto Rican flag has been, historically, the major symbol of pride during this event, and that it has been inscribed in multiple ways and in multiple sites –including Boricua bodies-- reveals that the flag is a signifier of cultural nationalism and political opposition to the dominant Anglo society as well as to the U.S. government. While there are many pro-statehood Puerto Ricans who may not necessarily equate these values with the flag, they are still reaffirming and performing an oppositional identity that resides in the historical meanings that the flag has carried since the nineteenth century on. For Kramer, the cultural meanings of the flag are displaced by more immediate, non-political ones. The flag may be a symbol, yes, but it is one that is devoid of its historical values. It is a metonymic reference to Puerto Rican culture, to the Parade, it is an adornment, at most and a piece of fabric, at the least.

In this episode, then, the Puerto Rican collective subjectivity can only appear marked by its political and cultural identification with the flag. Boricua national patriotism and ethnic pride are the fuel that triggers chaos and violence and that puts Seinfeld and his friends at risk for their personal and physical safety. The unmarked nature of Kramer's relationship to the flag erases the history of Puerto Rican resistance to U.S. domination and, in the process, criminalizes nationalism. Indeed, the program racializes

Puerto Ricans and their patriotism during the public event that historically has attempted to deracialize them.

The gap in cultural semantics evident in this episode also informs the response of NBC to the protests articulated by the National Puerto Rican Coalition and other groups. In a survey conducted through Latino Link (1998) after the episode, various respondents shared their negative reactions and outrage at these racialized images of Puerto Ricans as violent, savage subjects out of control. They also joined in a written statement by William Santiago demanding an apology from NBC. While at the time NBC executives insisted that the show did not insult or stereotype the community, two years later—as a result of the controversial Law and Order episode—they finally promised not to air the show again. (Dominguez) The fact that these television executives and producers could not recognize or validate the negative impact of these representations—in light of the lack of other, positive representations of boricuas in Hollywood and on television—indicates that they did not share the same cultural and historical codes through which the Puerto Rican audience “read” the episode. Manuel Mirabal, President of the National Puerto Rican Coalition, commented: “Obviously, these executives live in another planet to think that this program would not be offensive.” While they may live in the same planet and country as half of the Puerto Rican nation, they are light years away from intercultural knowledge and understanding.

The resignification of the Puerto Rican flag is accompanied by the recontextualization of the Puerto Rican Day Parade. The Parade in Seinfeld was not a central event to them, but it appears only as its indirect and negative effects: the nuisance of the traffic jam, the anger of Puerto Ricans at the burning of the flag, and the threat that Seinfeld and his friends feel at the so-called “mob”. Seinfeld is not interested in representing the Parade as a space of cultural performativity, for such positive images would reaffirm the ideal of an integrated Puerto Rican body politic in NYC. Thus, the Parade could only appear as context, as indirect reference, as background. The semantic gap between the value of the Parade for NY Puerto Ricans and the (anti) social meanings that are revealed in the Seinfeld episode suggests that as Puerto Ricans gradually integrate

themselves into the mainstream, dominant institutions such as media and TV will attempt to dismantle this through the colonialist discourse of the manichean allegory.

IV. THE CENTRAL PARK WILDINGS: THE DISCURSIVE LYNCHING OF THE PUERTO RICAN MALE

The manichean allegory is an economy of representation that transforms “racial difference into moral and even metaphysical difference.” (Jan Mohamed, 80) The representation of Puerto Ricans as a “mob” in Seinfeld reappears during the media coverage of the Central Park attacks on June 11, 2000, thus evincing the power that this colonialist discourse had on the average U.S. television audience. It is then recirculated as a gendered and racialized trope that, indeed, duplicates the role of colonialist texts, yet in the current context of race and the city:

If such literature can demonstrate that the barbarism of the native is irrevocable, or at least very deeply ingrained, then the European’s attempt to civilize him can continue indefinitely, the exploitation of his resources without hindrance, and the European can persist in enjoying a position of moral superiority. (JanMohamed, 81)

Two years after the Seinfeld episode, Anne Peyton Bryant, one of the white women who was attacked by a group of male youth in Central Park, was interviewed in the Geraldo Rivera show. In her initial comments she made explicit reference to the Seinfeld episode in order to refer, according to her, to the sort of violence that we can expect from the Puerto Rican Day Parade in New York. While the controversy that Geraldo Rivera was discussing, and that the media at large was exposing, had to do with the sexism, the violence against women and this society’s lack of systematic recognition of it, and particularly the indifference of the NY Police to these crimes, Peyton Bryant’s comment reveals the long-term impact that the Seinfeld episode had on its viewers. By establishing a direct association between the Puerto Rican Day Parade and sexual criminality, Anne Peyton Bryant reproduced the colonialist politics of the Seinfeld episode adding a gendered racialization to the collectivity of Seinfeld’s Puerto Rican mob. In direct response, on June 16, the

National Congress for Puerto Rican Rights issued a statement denouncing the youth who attacked more than fifty women that afternoon, the abuse against women, and the racism that was articulated by associating such crimes with the Puerto Rican Day Parade (2000). This association is also evident in the fact that in a web search to the Puerto Rican Day Parade one of the first links that appears is “Women’s Rights/Central Park Attacks”.

On September 15, 2000, Chris Rock made the following joke in his television show: “Big News in New York: The founder of the Puerto Rican Day Parade died last week. The viewing was on Monday from 3 to 6, and the groping was from 7 to 12.” This joke reveals that within three months of the Parade and the Central Park attacks the U.S. popular imagination has already cemented the direct relationship between the Parade and the attacks. This is based on certain logics: first, that all Puerto Rican men are complicit, even if a priori, of sexual crimes and that any Puerto Rican community event, including a wake, will be characterized by sexual abuse. The documentation on the arrests of the youth who participated in the Central Park attacks reveals a variety of racial and cultural groups: the men arrested “ranged in age from 16 to 33 and included a barber, a minister’s son and a father of two” (Cloud). Yet the stereotype of the Latin Lover and the Macho resurface in these cultural texts. Moreover, the female victims were represented as white women –although forty out of sixty victims were women of color-- and white women were selected by the media to act as representatives of all victims during public interviews and coverage. This inverse representation of the female victims constructed the image of the Latino male as a public (although not necessarily private) threat to white women, to the institution of the U.S. family and, ultimately, to the masculinity of white men. The fact that the media did not identify women of color as the targets of these attacks reveals that our bodies are invisible to dominant society unless we are objects of intercultural desire and of physical or discursive exploitation. By identifying only white women as victims, Puerto Rican men, and Latino male subjectivity in general become generally suspect in the public sphere, thus opening the path for a collective fear against urban youth of color as potential agents of violence and criminality. The image of brown/black men attacking white women is not new as it echoes the dominant logic and social phobias behind lynching in the South.

Thus, the authority and moral superiority of the State –embodied in the NYPD—and of dominant society is further reaffirmed in the continuous replay of the Central Park attacks on television news programming. Like the reiterated television images of the L.A. Riots in 1992, these visual narratives “elicit negative emotions” among viewers (Valle 51) and are more “readily remembered ...than the information contained in accompanying narration.” (Valle 51) The visual reiteration, then, helps cement the criminalization of young Latinos and simultaneously justifies increased vigilance, police authority, and containment of collective bodies of color in open, public spaces. At a time when police authority, judgement, fairness and power were publicly contested and questioned as a result of the repeated cases of abuse and outright murder of people of color –the Amalou Diallo case was still fresh in the minds of New Yorkers--, the indifference of the police toward women’s sexual victimization was explained precisely as a strategy to correct the image of an abusive, irrational, and barbaric police force. Yet the laissez-faire attitude toward sexual crime was not all-pervasive on June 11, 2000. Members of the police department arrested two musicians who were drumming on Bethesda Fountain, an open space preferred by congueros, rumberos, and other street musicians. If the police ignored women’s pleas against the very acts of fondling, undressing, grabbing, and even penetration by hand, (Cloud) they surely did not ignore the potentially transgressive meanings of conga playing that Afro-Caribbean drumming has historically articulated, even in current, postmodern urban spaces. In other words, while gender issues seemed unimportant, race and subordinate cultural expressions were not.

The fear of informal groups of people of color in public spaces continues to motivate the politics of containment and repression that characterizes U.S. urban centers. The new urban policies against Latino street vendors in Los Angeles and New York, against the “esquineros” who wait for a day of labor in Los Angeles, the complaints against quinceañera parties in the suburbs and noise ordinances all constitute what Mike Davis has called the “guerrilla warfare” against the tropicalizing presence of Latinos in this country’s public, urban spaces. (53-54) In this larger context, the New York Police ignored the women, but as a response to its public criticism

and outcries, then showed all of its force in investigating and arresting the youth who appeared in the video footage. With the help of the media –headlines that spelled in red letters: WANTED and the photos of the men in the video as fugitives from old western movies—the NYPD tried to vindicate its judicial authority and to reclaim its power as the State’s embodiment of Reason and moral authority, an identity that historically has been contingent on its structural differentiation with the Racial Other, the Puerto Rican/Latino male.

V. “SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH JORGE” OR, THE REASON/ABLE WHITENESS OF LAW AND ORDER:

“Sunday in the Park with Jorge”, aired on January 24, 2001, reveals how Reason and whiteness, inextricably interwoven, are discursively embodied in the judicial system. In its eleventh season, Law and Order constitutes the most extensive dramatic series on current television. It received an Emmy Award in 1997 for Outstanding Drama and has received the highest consecutive number of nominations in this category. Surveys indicate that this program has produced a total of 16.3 million viewers in the past eight years, which makes it the most valuable program for NBC. This high level of popularity and visibility suggests that its narratives and discourses of representation will have an enormous, potential impact. However, the popularity of the program is mostly explained by its intertextual scripts and stories. The writers, under the direction of its creator, Dick Wolf, choose real cases and events as inspiration for the episodes, thus producing not only fictional drama but the effects of a docudrama. This generic blending adds to the possible conflation, in the viewers’ minds, of historical events and fictional renderings, one that exacerbates the social impact of the racialized identities of Puerto Ricans in the diaspora.

In “Sunday in the Park with Jorge” detectives Briscoe and Green investigate the murder of a white woman whose body was found at the edge of the lake in Central Park during the Puerto Rican Day Parade. The husband of the victim, a young dot.com millionaire and his partner are the first suspects when it is revealed that their impending divorce would have threatened the financial stability of the company. But evidence leads to other suspects, and the detectives finally arrest Nestor, a young Brazilian man described as extremely shy and with a low IQ. The trial reaffirms his guilt. Nestor finally

confesses that he swam to the boat where the woman was and, reacting to her aggression, hit her head against the boat a number of times. Thus, the crime is explained away as an arbitrary, senseless (without any particular meaningfulness or purpose) reaction on the part of Nestor, who acted this way so that his Latino peers would not make fun of him. Thus, the white woman's murder is the direct result and consequence of the folly of reaffirming a public, Latino masculinity. Nestor, as an individual, becomes a metaphor for the threatening, collective Latino male subject, the true culprit in this murder.

The racialization of Latino and Puerto Rican males and of their sexuality is structured around a visual and discursive binary. At the onset of the program, the sexual attacks in Central Park—represented by numerous men of color identified as Puerto Rican by their t-shirts and bandanas with the Puerto Rican flag—are juxtaposed to the idyllic scene of an Anglo, professional couple in a rowboat making out. This couple discovers the body of the victim, and later we find out that they are engaged in an extra-marital affair. Thus, the illegitimacy of white sexuality—undermined by a joke about a putative adultery squad—is represented at the level of the individual and of the quasi-private realm, in contrast to the public savagery and out of control behavior of the boricua males.

This binary logic continues throughout the episode. The Puerto Rican male suspects are all referred to as “punks”, “mob”, and liars. The only one rendered a proper name, Kiki Morales, who later helps to identify Nestor, has a criminal record, has been in juvenile prison, and turns out to be an unreliable witness. The only boricua with an individualized identity is portrayed as an unredeemable, untrustworthy delinquent. In contrast, the white suspects and all those related to them have a proper name, are individuals identified with a particular job or profession, and they play a specific role within the narrative. Seth, the business partner, and the first suspect during the investigation, even has a rational motive for murdering the victim. The detectives reaffirm that his motive, money, is a very strong one. Indeed, it is a significant, rational, meaningful motive in contrast to Nestor's senseless aggression.

Nestor's actions, which constitute second-degree manslaughter, are represented as the consequences of an instance of the lack of reason and of common sense. He arbitrarily succumbed to what he perceived as the pressure of manliness, yet what stands out in the episode is the fact that there was a lack of premeditated, reasonable cause behind his actions. This binary representation echoes the Western discourse on Reason and rationality, through which modernity justifies racism by using Reason as a basis for group differentiations and subordination. If under modernity and industrial capitalism Reason is located in the dominant subject, Racial Others are then justifiably exploited, since their lack of Reason constitutes their lack of Humanity, and thus, their lack of rights. As Goldberg has written, "Subject assume value, then, only in so far as they are bearers of rights; and they are properly vested with rights only in so far as they are imbued with value." (37)

Yet the devaluing of the Puerto Rican and Latino males in this episode, which certainly adds to the already problematic Hollywood images of Latinos as gangsters, criminals, and urban delinquents, also serves as the Other through and against which the whiteness and Reason of those in the judicial system is constructed. The closing arguments of both lawyers during the trial, and the closing scene of the episode, clearly reinforce this discursive binary. While the Puerto Rican, mulatto lawyer with an accent provides a passionate and political defense of Puerto Ricans and of Nestor in particular, it is the prosecutor Jack McCoy (Sam Waterston) who makes a rational argument by reminding the jury about the responsibilities and consequences of individual actions. Again, the liberal emphasis on individuality is the logic for finding Nestor guilty, although the narrative continues to rely on the collectivity and generalizability of peoples of color. McCoy also attempts to de-racialize the definitions of the "mob", partly to locate the accountability on the individual, and partly to present the judicial system as colorblind, a representation that Dolores Inés Casillas identifies throughout the whole investigative process:

In an attempt to deter the negative perception (and responsibility) of the police, audiences see a variety of politicians calling the detectives' lieutenant and police captain in an effort to speed the investigation. In naming a white male

businessman as the suspect and not a Puerto Rican, the show projects a position of impartiality. So, despite the pressure by the “corrupted” politicians and higher ranked legal enforcements to prosecute a Puerto Rican on the basis of saving their own reputation, the detectives and hence “the law” is above them by remaining “fair” and not succumbing to the city’s racial politics. The conscious decision made by detectives “to follow the investigation where it takes them” characterizes the investigation as colorblind justice. (Casillas, n.p.)

The judicial system, and those that represent the law, cannot be irrational; they constitute Reason itself. The authoritative prosecutors, the detectives with integrity, and the policemen and the judicial system, behave in supposedly objective, neutral, yet goal-oriented, meaningful ways. The aim of the NYPD to restore a public image of rational behavior, fairness and justice is achieved through this episode.

In the closing scene, the three prosecutors leave the office after having resolved such a challenging and complex investigation. Their final comment,

–We started off with a white guy, put a Brazilian behind bars, for what happened during the Puerto Rican Day Parade;

-- New York City, the melting pot summarizes, on the one hand, the overt attempt of Law and Order to represent itself as a show that recognizes the multicultural diversity of New York City and its communities of color. Yet, covertly, it is the two white women who reaffirm the threat of Puerto Rican masculinity and culture to the public well-being. While the first statement by Prosecutor Abbie Carmichael (played by Angie Harmon) on the surface summarizes the thread of the investigation, it also suggests that Nestor is behind bars “for what happened during the Puerto Rican Day Parade.” This periphrastic reference to the murder –which is a fictional element yet central to the criminalizing discourse-- does not have to be explicit, for viewers have already accepted and understood that “what happened during the Puerto Rican Day Parade” was a threat to white women and to the tranquility of the middle-and upper-class sector in the City. This knowledge about Puerto Ricans as Racial Others has been already internalized in the

pre-texts to the show; that is, in the Seinfeld episode, in the media representations of the Central Park attacks, in newspapers, and in the Internet. “What happened during the Puerto Rican Day Parade” foregrounds criminality and a fictional murder that, in the minds of many, will be conflated with the historical reality of the Central Park attacks. Most disturbing, however, is the fact that this closing comment systematically erases the historical reference and the positive, community-building social meanings that the Parade has constructed through its symbolisms, “restored behaviors”, and appropriation of the public space. It also reaffirms the media representation of the female victims as only white, thus rendering the pain and trauma of the bodies of women of color in particular as unreal and inconsequential. Despite its overt claims to engage in cultural diversity, Law and Order’s erasure and re-racializing of a Puerto Rican collective, public subjectivity may have a more profound impact on mainstream audiences than what our own cultural productions and expressions in the diaspora could achieve.

VI. CONCLUSIONS:

As Anne Peyton Bryant’s comments revealed, the dominant media discourse that criminalizes Latino males and Puerto Rican nationalism and patriotism has been internalized in the U.S. popular imaginary. What are the social, economic, and symbolic repercussions of this ideology for the Puerto Rican and Latino communities? In terms of the Puerto Rican Day Parade itself, a number of sponsors have canceled their subsidy for future events. While the Parade “was no more problematic than other large parades”, according to the NY Police Department, in 2001 there was increased security and policing. This, of course, reveals the tarnished image that has ensued from the Central Park attacks and its association with this collective, ethnic event. In the words of Ralph Morales, the parade’s vice-president, “no doubt it has had a very negative impact.” Organizers this past year were “still more focused on damage control from last year than promotion for an event that is, at heart, a celebration of heritage.”

As a result, the Puerto Rican Day Parade Organizing Committee has increased its publicity and has attempted to purge this racialized construct from the event. Thus, its decision to ban rap music from its floats this past year created controversy around the

issue of defining Puerto Rican culture. Rap is being banned precisely to cleanse the criminalized image of the Parade and of Puerto Ricans, by association. Yet the argument used had to do with whether rap music was or not an integral part of Puerto Rican tradition. This debate foregrounds the ways in which the Parade's organizing committee struggled to integrate Puerto Ricans once more into the multicultural repertoire of traditional, middle-class ethnic groups in the United States. By banning rap music, they were dismantling the most oppositional discourses of youth from the event.

In terms of gender, it is not arbitrary that the criminalization of the Puerto Rican male by the media went hand in hand with the invisibility of women of color as victims of this sexual abuse. The visual presence of white women victims on the news and talk shows not only triggered past racial memories of lynching, but it also displaced the voice and the perspectives of women of color from being heard at the national level. This is significant in order to understand the gender implications of this analysis. A critique of the criminalization of the Latino male should not automatically imply eliding the reality of women.

As Henry Giroux has already stated, the impact of media as public discourse needs to be foregrounded in cultural studies. Textuality is not important for its own sake, but significant for the power it holds over our imaginaries:

...popular cultural texts can be used to demonize black and Latino youth while reproducing a consensus of common sense that legitimates racist policies of either containment or abandonment in the inner cities. But such instances of racial coding cannot reside merely within the boundaries of the text to be fully understood as part of the broader landscape of racial injustice. Depictions of urban youth as dangerous, pathological, and violent must be located in terms of where different possibilities of uses and effects of such representations may ultimately reside in contexts of every life that are at the forefront of multicultural struggles." (82)

Indeed, it is within this context of struggles that Puerto Ricans continue to resist and oppose these criminalizing, dominant images of their community. Organized efforts against NBC led to the network's decision not to repeat the Seinfeld and the Law and Order shows.

This symbolic victory will have some impact, hopefully, in the process of decision-making in future television productions. As to the Puerto Rican community in New York, they feel “they should make a show of force after all the negative publicity.” (Navarro, 4) By reasserting their collective presence once again in the public space, our subordinate communities continue the ongoing process of contestation that is needed to reiterate our historical and cultural agency in the U.S. imaginary. The fact that the parade organizers have considered “the Central Park attacks their worst crisis” in the history of this event (Navarro, 5) reveals that the discourses produced by the media can be more powerful and problematic than history itself.

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