David Roman

Latino Genealogies: Broadway and Beyond

Presentation, David Roman
English Department

Respondent, Professor Leo Braudy
English Department

Meeting Notes, Johanna Blakley
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Celebrity Politics & Public Life

A presentation to the Celebrity, Politics & Public Life faculty seminar

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The Norman Lear Center

Founded in January 2000, the Norman Lear Center is a multidisciplinary research and public policy center exploring implications of the convergence of entertainment, commerce and society. On campus, from its base in the USC Annenberg School for Communication, the Lear Center builds bridges between schools and disciplines whose faculty study aspects of entertainment, media and culture. Beyond campus, it bridges the gap between the entertainment industry and academia, and between them and the public. Through scholarship and research; through its fellows, conferences, public events and publications; and in its attempts to illuminate and repair the world, the Lear Center works to be at the forefront of discussion and practice in the field.

Celebrity, Politics & Public Life

Since Fall 2000, the Norman Lear Center has sponsored a popular faculty seminar series on Celebrity, Politics & Public Life. Faculty and deans from over 20 departments convene three times each semester to develop an interdisciplinary analysis of political life in this country as it is shaped by popular culture. The project is co-directed by USC History Department Chair Steven J. Ross and Leo Braudy, Leo S. Bing Professor of English. Our topics have ranged from Elian Gonzales and Timothy McVeigh to Angela Davis, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Edward G. Robinson. The group includes professors and deans from anthropology, art history, cinema-television, theatre, ethnic studies, American studies, German, sociology, business, political science, economics, education, policy and planning, philosophy, gender studies, art history, psychology, communication, journalism, English, and history.

Participants

Johanna Blakley, The Norman Lear Center
Leo Braudy, English
Tom Hollihan, Communication
Selma Holo, University Galleries
Mark Kann, Political Science
Jim Kincaid, English
Tim McKeon, The Norman Lear Center
Richard Meyer, Art History
Michael Miklos, English
Tania Modleski, English
Dana Polan, Cinema/Television
Christiane Robbins, Art History
Steven Ross, History

The Executive Committee for 2001/2002

Leo Braudy, English
Selma Holo, University Galleries
Marty Kaplan, The Norman Lear Center
Nancy Lutkehaus, Anthropology
Dana Polan, Cinema/Television
Steven Ross, History
Marita Sturken, Communication
David Roman

Latino Genealogies: Broadway and Beyond

Summary
Professor Roman argues that John Leguizamo’s “Freak” presents two genealogical systems: one based on the biological family and another based on a history of pan-Latino performers. Leguizamo dedicates his work to both of these systems by coming to terms with his father and by invoking the Latino performers who have blazed the trail before him. In so doing, Leguizamo forges new models of kinship for Latino culture and endorses a cultural identification that includes a spectrum of Latino identities.

David Roman’s Opening Comments
This work comes at an odd cross-roads in Roman’s disciplinary affiliations: American Studies has taken little interest in contemporary American theatre and Theatre Studies has not fully engaged in Latino issues. Roman sees a new Latino celebrity arising out of the performing arts, one that goes out of its way to pay tribute to Latino predecessors (as Jennifer Lopez does with Rita Moreno and Ricky Martin has with Jose Feliciano and Carlos Santana). Both Lopez and Martin arose out of the performing arts and both are paying their dues to performers from a variety of Latino backgrounds. Professor Roman is interested in how Leguizamo situates himself in a history of Latino celebrity in the performing arts.

Respondent, Professor Leo Braudy, English Department
Professor Braudy, author of “The Frenzy of Renown,” contextualized Leguizamo’s fabrication of a personal cultural genealogy within the history of fame. Throughout the centuries, famous people have discovered that cultural and biological genealogies can be selectively edited and woven together to strengthen their celebrity identities. Alexander the Great established an alternate genealogy for himself that lifted him above his biological background, which was tied to a marginal culture. In order to give himself the proper pedigree and power, he created a genealogy that linked him to Achilles, a figure predating the Greeks, whose culture was dominant during Alexander’s reign. (Professor Selma Holo later mentions Goya, who refused to acknowledge his painter father as an influence, but instead created a genealogy for himself including only Velazquez, Rembrandt, and Nature). Similarly, Leguizamo distances himself from his biological roots by critiquing the too-powerful role of the biological family in Latino culture and linking himself instead with a pantheon of pan-Latino celebrities.
Professor Braudy also commented on the complex notion of the “freak” and its relationship to celebrity and performance. A freak is usually understood as someone or something that stands outside the norm. Leguizamo makes the double move of taking this outside stance (by presenting himself and his work as freakish) while successfully promoting his work to a traditional Broadway audience. A freak can also describe someone who can become something other than himself (i.e., when someone “freaks out,” she stops acting like herself), suggesting a level of duplicity in the figure. This facet of the “freak” is crucial to our reading of the Morales character from “A Chorus Line.” Leguizamo (or more accurately “Young John” in the play) powerfully identifies with Morales as she recounts a story in which she finds it impossible to create an inauthentic feeling for her acting teacher. Her “authentic moment” is when she admits she feels nothing in the scene because it has no bearing on her own history or feelings. In one sense, Morales is a “freak” because she could not produce a simple task for her acting teacher. But in another sense, she is unable to be a “freak” like Leguizamo, who received rave reviews for his ability to create a host of characters very different from himself (including an Irish guy in a pub). While this is clearly not Morales’ forte, Braudy noted that she impersonates her teacher as she tells her story about her inability to perform inauthentic emotions, adding one more layer of complexity to an analysis of identity and impersonation, which are at the heart of “Freak.”

**The Discussion**

Building on Braudy’s comments about impersonation, Professor Richard Meyer indicated the importance of the fact that Leguizamo does not impersonate Morales in his play, but moves instead to a seat in the theatre where he listens to a tape of her performance, playbill in hand. In this intriguing scene, Leguizamo acknowledges his debt to Latino celebrity as he performs the role of spectator and fan.

Professor Dana Polan, who is working on a project on celebrity intellectuals, initiated discussion on “virtuosity” and its relation to celebrity. “Freak” succeeded because Leguizamo proved himself a performance virtuoso; the play could not exist without his performance of it (unlike the Morales role which was played by 18 different people during its Broadway run). The poster for “Freak,” which features Leguizamo’s giant open mouth, reflects the star’s utter centrality to this play; his performance is meant to engulf you. How strong, then, is Leguizamo’s invocation of past Latino celebrities? Isn’t he instead asserting his difference, his uniqueness, his own virtuosity? Richard Meyer pointed out that the two are not mutually exclusive: aren’t most celebrities defined by their virtuosity? Isn’t that what it takes to be a celebrity in the first place?

A good deal of the conversation revolved around the issue of family as it pertains to Latino culture and to culture at large. Professor Steve Ross challenged Roman to explain what is specifically Latino about the family crises in “Freak.” Isn’t the dissolution and recreation of the family a theme to be found in countless non-Latino works, including “Death of a Salesman?” If so, Ross felt it was important to open up the piece: to start with an analysis of this work in a Latino context and
then place it in a larger historical context. While Roman said he would consider examining the immigrant experience, he did not feel it was necessary to become more general than that.

Professor Jim Kincaid strongly disagreed with Ross’ suggestion. He argued that the startling specificity of the work could be lost in an effort to extrapolate the argument outward. Ross pointed out that “Freak” was a success on Broadway and HBO precisely because it was able to comment on issues important to a very broad audience; Roman should be able to make a similar move with his analysis of “Freak.”

Professor Tania Modleski disagreed: she argued that “Freak” was a success because it is about an experience so different from mainstream America’s. Viewers like to see things about lives very different from their own.

Professor Mark Kann also asked Roman to explain what was distinctively Latino about this story of a family and a man’s rejection of the patriarch. Kann felt that “Freak” was very much in line with the mythology of the American Adam, who has to lift himself up by his own bootstraps after his family tries to drag him down.

However, Richard Meyer claimed that it was unnecessary to explain what was distinctively Latino about this story - it is not a question that would be asked of non-minority work. Meyer also took issue with Kann’s analysis of Leguizamo’s family in the play. He pointed out that we should be careful about conflating the father with the family in this play. Some members of “Young John’s” family are very supportive, though his father is not.

Professor Tom Hollihan and Professor Holo both commented on the slippery issue of “universality,” which polarized part of our discussion. Hollihan mentioned on the ironic aspects of a “universal narrative” that features a rejection of the father: since the father is often the traditional figure of power in most cultures, and a guarantor of that power, it is not surprising that this act of rebellion is a common literary motif that is both compelling and cliché as it reflects a rejection of a cultural tradition and reaffirms it at the same time. Holo argued that the fact that readers see universal themes in Roman’s work indicates that the paper is successful.

**Suggestions for the Paper**

- Discuss in more detail the celebrities that Leguizamo does (and does not) mention. Why are they mostly male? Why is Richard Pryor left out?
- Re Coco Fusco: how can a performer project irony in a performance?
- Hone your argument about the role of the father and the appearance of the picture at the end. Does Leguizamo see the father/son relationship as ultimate? Is this his point despite himself?
- Contextualize “Freak” within the rest of Leguizamo’s work, particularly “Spic-O-Rama”
- Compare Leguizamo and Anna Deveare-Smith: is impersonation a way of gaining power over others or is it disempowering?
• Is there a “trans-Latino” international trend?
• Tease out the pilgrim scene
• Sanny, as the mother’s brother, is the traditional protector; investigate this further