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Hybridizing Puerto Ricanness

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***Brincando el charco: Portrait of a Puerto Rican.* Produced, written and directed by Frances Negrón-Muntaner. *Women Make Movies*, 1994. 55 minutes.**

Frances Negrón-Muntaner's *Brincando el charco* is a film that brings up suggestive questions about the construction and reconfiguration of the cinematic modalities of fiction and non-fiction.¹ The fact that the film blurs the lines between documentary and (melo) dramatic narrative aligns this text with the political projects of cinematic practices and academic frameworks such as the New Latin American Cinema (particularly through the concept of "Imperfect Cinema"), the New Queer Cinema, Teshome Gabriel's specific iteration of Third Cinema, and Hamid Naficy's Accented Cinema.² However, the task at hand is to review *Brincando el charco* and propose how it dialogues with the Caribbean.

Elsewhere, I have argued that Caribbean film and video need to be understood as part of larger creolization processes that involve the configuration and constant reinvention—that is, in the imaging and imagining—of transnational cultural communities emerging from or historically connected to the geopolitical area known as the Caribbean (Blasini 2008). These cinematic creolization processes become apparent in the characterization of historical revisions, narrative constructions and cinematic representations that engage the social, political and cultural processes of Caribbean syncretism. In this sense, the formation and constant transformation—in other words, the hybridity—of Caribbean cultures could be traced through different narrative and representational tactics, particularly those connected to rescuing and giving voice to the stories and cultural manifestations that have been suppressed, erased or forgotten by Eurocentric and normative versions of the region's history. In the case of *Brincando el charco*, Negrón-Muntaner opens up cultural spaces for the expression of distinct versions of "Puerto Ricanness"—particularly in terms of race, ethnicity and queerness—that have emerged as a result of migrations to the U.S., especially those that have been taking place since the 1980s. In addition, she suggests the possibility of creating alliances with other groups (e.g. certain sectors of the African American community) who share cultural affinities stemming from larger collective historical experiences common to the Caribbean region.

The film presents the story of Claudia Marín (played by Negrón-Muntaner herself), a young Puerto Rican lesbian artist/photographer who has been living for seven years in voluntary exile in Philadelphia.³ The news that her father has died interrupts Claudia's everyday life and forces her to re-examine her identity, including her positions towards Puerto Rico. For three days, Claudia undergoes a process of internal reflection while she decides if she will attend her father's funeral or not. This process reveals how living in exile in the U.S. (Puerto Rico's current colonizing country) allows for a distinct critical distance to reevaluate and to question "Puerto Ricanness" as well as the way in which racial and sexual discourses are articulated in the island and in the U.S. This critical distance could be apprehended as a "privileged double vision" where the production of identities in relation to race, ethnicity, sexuality, and nationality, among others, is understood as a provisional positionality that demands a constant, and sometimes contradictory, negotiation between the cultures of Puerto Rico and the U.S.

Even though migrations to the U.S. have been taking place since the beginning of the 20th century, it is the massive movement during the late 1940s and the 1950s that becomes a key historical moment for understanding the mythical role of the U.S. as a place for prosperity in the island's social imaginary. Part of the governmental strategies used during Puerto Rico's industrial development after World War II was to promote the idea that the U.S. offered better working opportunities, thus fostering the migration of Puerto Ricans who then became cheap legal working resources for many factories, especially those located on the East Coast. This intense migratory pattern also reverberated socially and culturally in the formation of a larger diasporic Puerto Rican community that still claims to be connected to the island, even though a considerable number of those in Puerto Rico might want to disavow that claim. Without trying to erase this important historical juncture, as exemplified by the inclusion of documentary footage about this specific migration, *Brincando el charco* emphasizes a new kind of migratory pattern to the U.S. Along with economic reasons, this migration is more associated to individual desires of finding more freedom of personal, professional and intellectual expression. Through the character of Claudia, the film recontextualizes notions of contemporary migration and exile particularly in relation to discourses of gender, race and sexuality.

Even though the film uses Claudia's life as the main axis, as explained by the subtitle "*Portrait of a Puerto Rican*," *Brincando el charco* includes other voices that provide a perspective of some of the elements that mark the negotiation of a Puerto Rican identity in the U.S. In general, these voices are present in the diegesis in two different ways: 1) as characters that directly intervene in Claudia's story (for example, Ana, her lover, or

Rob, Claudia's African American friend) and 2) through the incorporation of interviews and documentary footage at different points in the film. The film's final credits characterize these interviews as "portraits" and identify the five interviewees by their real names: Ramón González, Sandra Andino, Agnes Lugo, Moisés Agosto, and Chloë Georas.

The mix of voices of fictional characters and real subjects creates a polyphonic text where different positions existent in the Puerto Rican community in the U.S. converge, sometimes in harmony and other times in conflict. In addition, this polyphony simultaneously validates the points articulated by the fictional characters as well as the lived experiences of the interviewees. The juxtaposition and its subsequent destabilization of the traditional definition of the cinematic modalities of the fiction film and the documentary become the avenue for rereading and reconstructing Puerto Rican history in such a way that it incorporates traditionally marginalized sectors, both in the island and in the U.S., such as migrants, blacks, and sexual minorities. *Brincando el charco*'s historical rereadings question the notion of the existence of a unifying Puerto Rican identity and opens up the space for the expression of multiple Puerto Rican subjectivities.

Brincando el charco uses various sources to document the historical changes that have marked the Puerto Rican community in exile during the last fifty years. The film uses black and white documentary footage to show different moments related to the emigration to the U.S.'s east coast during the 1940s and 1950s, as well as the community's growth during subsequent decades (for example, the footage about the Young Lords' demonstrations during the 1970s). The five "portraits" or interviews as well as the sections in color about the Puerto Rican parade and the gay parade simultaneously work to establish a chronological continuity with the black and white documentary footage and to provide a contemporary historical perspective of Puerto Ricans living in the U.S. These sections about contemporary life inscribe in Puerto Rican history the marginalities produced by race, gender and sexuality, while repositioning the notion of exile as a part of individual projects that are not exclusively connected with economic mobility.

Brincando el charco constitutes an important step in contemporary Puerto Rican cultural production that attempts to imagine Puerto Rico as a diverse, conflictive and contradictory community that, in addition, is not geographically bounded to the physical territory of the Caribbean island. Furthermore, by reclaiming queerness, blackness and *latinidad* as integral axes in the constitution of many potential cultural and political identities, the film challenges hegemonic definitions and normative frameworks of Puerto Ricanness. Indeed, it can be argued that the kind of imaginative project that Negrón-Muntaner proposes is what makes

Brincando el charco part of a larger diasporic Caribbean culture. As Stuart Hall (1992) argues, the idea of the diaspora experience in the Caribbean is defined “by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity, diversity; by a conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*” (p. 234). Consequently, along with constituting an honest attempt to depict the diversity extant in the Puerto Rican community and its diaspora (which is not circumscribed to the U.S.), *Brincando el charco* allows for opening up dialogues about the similarities and the differences between Puerto Ricanness and Caribbeanness. In fact, the potential dialogues proposed by the text go beyond the aforementioned two to include discourses about multiple (and often times clashing) subjective positions. As a result, *Brincando el charco* is a valuable film for courses exploring the interrelationship between culture, politics and identity—e.g., Queer Cinema, Film and Social Change, and Contemporary Latino/Latin American Popular Culture, just to mention three examples.

Notes

- ¹ The film’s title, *Brincando el charco*, literally means “jumping across the pond.” The phrase is popularly used in Puerto Rico to connote traveling, particularly to the U.S.
- ² For more information on the New Latin American Cinema, see the edited collection *The New Latin American Cinema* (Martin 1997), including Julio García Espinosa’s (1998) classical essay, “For an Imperfect Cinema.” For Teshome Gabriel’s specific articulation of Third Cinema, see the essay by Teshome Gabriel (1989). For more details on the New Queer Cinema, see the work by B. Ruby Rich (2004) and for information on Accented Cinema, see the book by Hamid Naficy (2001).
- ³ The fact that director Negrón-Muntaner plays the film’s lead character constitutes another example of the way in which *Brincando el charco* blurs the line between fiction and non-fiction.

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From Gun Man to God Man: *Cheating Death*

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***Cheating Death*. Written and directed by Eric Geringas. Montreal, PQ: National Film Board of Canada, 2005. 25 minutes.**

The topic of guns, gangs, Black youth and violence has become an increasingly urgent matter in Canadian cities such as Toronto over the last decade. Negative media portrayals of so-called "at-risk" communities, which tend to be heavily populated by Caribbean, African, South Asian and Latino families, persist, while the members of these communities recount incidences of overpolicing, police harassment, and racial profiling. Debates rage in the media over the pros and cons of publicly funded Black-focused schools, while the murder rate of young Black males in the city continues to climb. In the midst of this comes Eric Geringas' 2005 documentary on Gyasi Ferdinand, former crack dealer, former gun man, who meets death twice on the operating table following an assassination attempt, and who in return gives his life to God. Although this is a provocative and insightful tale of one young man, (dubbed a "character study" by the National Film Board of Canada)