Washington Heights. Dir. Alfredo de Villa. Perf. Tomas Milian, Manny Perez, Danny Hoch. LionsGate Films, 2002. Film.

In 2002 *Washington Heights* more or less gently bounced its way to American Indie theaters. It is a niche, perhaps cliche, story of a twenty-something dreamer, burgeoning artist from one of New York's poor 'hoods, its brown cast members ... yes, all of these factors near set this flick as a *non sequitur* for American cinema. Yet, on the backdrop of the race-laden 1990s, the debated contested 2000 election, the still-fresh aftermath of 9-11, this Latino movie actually provides the viewing public with more than just another story of the down and out 'hood. It creates a safe, feel-good, family movie. Moreover, the thrust of the movie ends with the warm and fuzzy happy ending of personal success. If this story had been about white characters I am not uncertain it would not have rose to cult legend, box office fame, and seen more mainstream praise.

Washington Heights, these days, has risen to fame via MTVs reality TV series, and as for neighborhoods outside of the all-encompassing Manhattan Washington Heights is one of the more noted ones. In all reality, if you have not idled away in this ten story town few non locals are going to see niche neighborhoods inside NYCs central core of Manhattan ... okay, The Village perhaps will make a surface appearance, but the distinct characteristics, divisions, and idiosyncrasies that make them home often fall outside of the traveler's pen or the film maker's eye. The hardened New Yorker knows, the red line — the most vibrant and perhaps busiest line—runs deepest under *Washington Heights,* the Seven line is a route of overcrowded cars with each stop placing you within another culture's cuisine (only tourists call it "the international express"), and only on a rare sunny day on the other side of the moon does the L line actually run.

This 'hood, a little Dominican enclave, hosts the largest Dominican population outside of the Dominican Republic itself. Of course, astute historians, locales, and popular culture aficionados know that New York City holds a special little niche for hosting the largest Greek community (ahem, in Astoria, Queens) outside of Greece, the five borough city hosts more Puerto Ricans than all of the island itself, parts of the city are so heavily populated with non-white residents that the white New Yorker is often nowhere to be found. For instance, on my elongated city block I am

one of three *gringas*, as my neighbors remind me. Is it that uncommon? Three blocks north there's a little Polish street. Thus, the spaces of NYC tend to be a post structuralist paradise with the traditional boundaries still stationary, even in transient residents have altered the make-up of the street. In regards to our commentary on the neighborhood of Washington Heights it is bordered by the George Washington Bridge, just south of the still affordable Manhattan neighborhood of Innwood, and the poverty and crime of the neighborhood still marks its legacy. In 2015 the crime waves of the area have largely subsided, but the average income base is still relatively low compared to swankier enclaves in parallel streets. Yet, our story remains a classic tale of rags to dreams of riches.

Washington Heights places the 28-year-old Carlos as the center of our story, as he aspires to break out of his 'hood, Latino background, and make a career from his comic book drawings. Carlos, played by Manny Perez, gives the viewer that classic character of someone so caught up in his vision of leaving that he forgets the beauty of his 'hood, home, family, and life. The broken sidewalks of the area, the friends in desperate need of scores and cash to pay off dealers, and the allure of a young woman's eyes, her soft embrace, and potential love fuel the folds of this tale. This tale, one that we have seen dozens of times before, marks not just a Latino culture of male dominance and familial expectations. No, instead it also transcends these bounds so that in a postmodernist world the viewer coming back with life seasoned eyes thirteen years later appreciates that this story emulates that of the Greek son being pushed to medical school, the Chinese son to overtake the laundry business, or the Jewish son to pursue a law degree all while each of them suppress and overlook their own passions and desires. The power of so-called stability, the power of a familial hold, and the power of perceived social repression continually shape our evolving world.

In the story here Carlos spends his off hours drawing his comics, seeking approval in the publishing world, and contacts within tell him to expand the stories, make them come alive and off the page, and pull the reader into a near trace state. Yet, just as Carlos receives concerted advice and hopes of a publication his father — the owner of a bodega — is shot in a robbery attempt. Take due note of the earlier mentions of a poor 'hood, and the robbery falls within the confines of expectation and ease. Carlos must run the store while his father recovers, and in doing so the dreamer is jolted into the community he inhabits yet eschews.

Forced altered reality make Carlos a more centered male. In this regard, he becomes the Latino male, in charge, devoted to family, and adhering to familial demands. Though, as his father proclaims no "gringo is going to print your drawings," the viewer is assaulted with the power of familial fear, regret, and angst. In this regard, the poor, Latino, and immigrant backdrop remind us that dreams are for the rich. They are not celebrated here, as the toils and expectations of life will literally let you down if you deviate from the predictable path. Yet, the power of a feel-good movie is that the audience learns that family, life, love, and dreams can intermix.

Carlos, in the end, sells his drawings. How? He brings that community he once eschewed and cast aside as *proqueria*, but in the end his *casa* served as the sounding board in a city of dreams, dreamers, artists, and achievers.

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