Méndez, Susan C.
THE FIRE BETWEEN THEM: RELIGION & GENTRIFICATION IN ERNESTO QUIÑONEZ'S
CHANGO’S FIRE
The City University of New York
New York, Estados Unidos

Available in: http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=37722223007
This essay addresses how religion and gentrification become interconnected for the Puerto Rican community in Ernesto Quiñonez’s *Chango’s Fire*. The move from Pentecostalism to Santeria for the protagonist Julio emphasizes an assertion of ethnic identity that the community of Spanish Harlem needs in order to interrogate the process of gentrification. Moreover, an analysis of the religious discourses in this novel exposes economic and social inequities and their critical impact on Spanish Harlem as well as demonstrates the significant connection between ethnic and religious identity for Latino/as. [Keywords: Gentrification, Pentecostalism, Santeria, agency, Puerto Ricans, Spanish Harlem, ethnic identity]
SCHOLARSHIP ON ERNESTO QUIÑONEZ’S NOVELS HAS BEEN developing over the years. There have been several articles and book chapters written about Quiñonez’s first novel, Bodega Dreams; the topics covered range from literary tropicalizations to intertextual connections with F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby. On the subject of Chango’s Fire (2004), his second novel, however, there have been fewer critical works. Quiñonez’s second novel has been addressed in June Dwyer’s essay, “Reimagining the Ethnic Enclave: Gentrification, Rooted Cosmopolitanism, and Ernesto Quiñonez’s Chango’s Fire,” and in a chapter entitled “The Meaning of Consuelo and Chango’s Fire: Latino Puerto Rican Theology” in Bridget Kevane’s Profane & Sacred: Latino/a American Writers Reveal the Interplay of the Secular and the Religious. Each of these works analyzes one of the major concepts of the novel. Dwyer’s article emphasizes how patterns of gentrification in Spanish Harlem prompt the protagonist Julio’s response of rooted cosmopolitanism (the stance in which one accepts the change coming to one’s locale while still guarding the ethnic integrity and history of said location); in regard to Dwyer’s essay, I would agree with her use of the term “rooted cosmopolitanism,” and offer my reading, focused on the intersections of religion and gentrification, as an explanation of the reasons behind Julio’s ambivalent attitude toward change, how he realizes it is a necessity but also still wants his community to have a voice in planning this change. Meanwhile, Bridget Kevane’s chapter focuses on the novel’s use of religion, specifically how Julio “seek[s] alternative spiritual paths for [his] sense of identity and for [his] community” (2008: 70). Neither piece focuses on how patterns of gentrification and spiritual practices evident in Ernesto Quiñonez’s Chango’s Fire might be connected to each other. My essay makes this critical intervention. Analysis of the symbol of fire foments this connection between religion and gentrification. If housing, as June Dwyer asserts in her essay, is the controlling metaphor for Julio Santana and his family (2009: 128), then fire must be the controlling symbol for Julio and his family as well.

Fire figures prominently in the life of Julio Santana. Julio lives with his parents, a retired musician/recovering addict father and a devout Pentecostal mother, in an apartment he owns. His best friends are Maritza, a social activist/pseudo-preacher woman; Trompo Loco, a developmentally challenged young man who is more like his little brother than his peer; and Papelito, a local religious and business man who acts as Julio’s mentor. Julio makes an illegal but lucrative living as an arsonist, and as a lifetime resident of Spanish Harlem, he has a history of being displaced.
by the "urban renewal" fires of the 1970s and 1980s. Additionally, Julio was raised in his mother's Pentecostal faith, a religion rooted in that pivotal moment where the Holy Spirit, present in tongues of fire, visited the heads of Jesus’ apostles after His ascension. Finally, a babalawo, a high priest in Santeria, named Papelito calls Julio a son of Chango, the powerful and passionate Afro-Cuban orisha (deity) of thunder, lightening, fire, and justice, who wields his double-headed axe as a sign of his virility and his ability to create and destruct. In the past, the energy of Chango fueled the resistance of slaves against their masters. Significantly, Julio uses fire to achieve economic justice for his family as his illicit earnings allow him to move his family out of the New York City housing projects. Thus, Julio is named a son of Chango most appropriately. Moreover, it is fire that best symbolizes the religious tensions between Pentecostalism and the Yoruba-based faith of Santeria, and the conflicted social phenomenon of gentrification in Spanish Harlem; these tensions and conflicts lie at the heart of Julio Santana’s troubled relationships and questionable life decisions in this novel.

*Chango’s Fire* opens to find both Julio and his neighborhood of Spanish Harlem at distinct turning points. Julio begins to stray from his Pentecostal faith and feels drawn to Santeria; at the same time he questions his religion, he critiques the patterns of gentrification in his community and yearns for a more routine life than working as an arsonist. There are distinct but parallel relationships here between Julio and his religion and Julio and his community. Julio’s aversion to the Pentecostal faith of his youth mirrors an aversion to the dominant Anglo society that is largely responsible for the fires and the gentrification of his neighborhood. A connection between ethnic and religious identities for the Puerto Rican community causes these parallel relationships to intersect eventually. The draw Julio feels toward Santeria appears to be a response of ethnic/cultural pride to the gentrification of Spanish Harlem. Throughout *Chango’s Fire*, the religious discourse and tension between Santeria and Protestantism, particularly Pentecostalism, exposes socioeconomic inequities and demonstrates Santeria to be a source of individual and communal empowerment and social change. In short, religion can provide for the spiritual and social salvation of Spanish Harlem.

**ERNESTO QUIÑONEZ AND HIS WORKS ARE THE LATEST TO JOIN THE CANON OF PUERTO RICAN DIASPORA LITERATURE.**

Ernesto Quiñonez and his works are the latest to join the canon of Puerto Rican diaspora literature. As José L. Padilla-Torres and Carmen Haydée-Rivera of *Writing off the Hyphen: New Critical Perspectives on the Literature of the Puerto Rican Diaspora* contend, Puerto Rican diaspora literature increasingly entails the critical examination of nation, histories, linguistic hybridity, cultural identity, and necessitates engagement with postcolonial and postmodern theoretical frameworks (2005: 1–12). The focus of this essay on tracing the parallels between the discourses of religion and urbanization for the Latino/a community in Spanish Harlem evokes...
the study of power, histories, and communities in postcolonial theory and employs
the analysis of identity and fragmentation in postmodern theory. Particularly,
addressing the role of religion in the novel continues the literary discussion of how
the use of Santeria fleshes out identity and portrays a resistance to acculturation;
this conversation began in essays such as María Teresa Marrero’s “Historical and
Literary Santería: Unveiling Gender and Identity in U.S. Cuban Literature” in the
text *Tropicalizations*. Consequently, Quiñonez’s text and this essay’s analysis further
the current trends in the study of Puerto Rican and Caribbean diaspora literature
that deconstruct the process of transnationalism in order to reconceptualize the
relationship between place, identity, and the notion of home.

**Protestantism, Pentecostalism, and Latino/as**

Despite Julio’s problematic relationship with Pentecostalism, he found great
happiness in his church community as a boy. While attending one of Maritza’s
church services, Julio experiences pleasant memories of his past:

> Even though I’m not there to worship, never would worship again, it feels good and
> warm to listen and be around all these families. Because when you have been raised
> by the belief in God, one that loves and cares for you, that dream that He really exists
> stays with you. And when you hear the gospels being sung, or something that strikes
> up those memories of when He was as real to you as your parents, it fills you with joy.
> (Quiñonez 2004: 193)

Julio recalls the sense of safety that he received from a belief in God; this belief stays
with him, as evidenced by the joy prompted by the gospels. Though Julio admits
he cannot worship ever again, a comforting belief in God attracts him. With such
positive experiences about God, the reader wonders what happened to Julio to make
him refrain from worship.

According to Julio, disastrous fires drive him away from his faith. When the
Santana family moved to an apartment above their newly relocated temple on 100th
Street, they were burned out by a series of fires, and so began Julio’s disenchantment
with religion: “One by one, the buildings on that block were torched, until only
a shoe repair shop stood alone. The city placed all the families in welfare hotels,
and later we all landed in the projects. The days of singing and glory were over. It
was from that day on that, for me, the word of God was never ‘love’ or ‘light’ but
‘fire’” (Quiñonez 2004: 136). Julio experienced a childhood happy in faith until
that sense of community and security was taken from him. He believes his religion
could not protect him from loss and grief; thus, he cannot think of the word of
God as anything but “fire.” In Julio’s case, the destructive flames of Spanish Harlem
subsume the regenerative tongues of fire of the Holy Spirit that is at the heart of the
Pentecostal religion. There was nothing left for him in matters of faith.

Julio’s identification and subsequent struggle as a Pentecostal brings attentin
to this religion’s unique history in the Puerto Rican community, which is part of a
larger history of Protestantism in the Latin American world. A Protestant presence
existed in Spain as early as the sixteenth century, and exiles of the Spanish Inquisition
brought their Protestant beliefs to the European colonies of the New World
(De La Torre and Aponte 2001: 61). Moreover, De La Torre and Aponte state that,
“in the border regions of the English colonies, later the United States, there was
contact with the border regions of New Spain, later Mexico” (2001: 61). Protestantism
has been present and spreading since the colonial era in the New World. Hector Avalos further explains how Protestantism was brought to Puerto Rico: “Protestantism made its first significant inroads into Puerto Rico after the US gained control of the island in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War of 1898. By around 1910, Protestants had some 15 missionary societies, 120 churches and 326 missions in Puerto Rico” (2003: 96). Being under United States government control meant great opportunities for Protestant evangelism and missionary work in Puerto Rico. Additionally, De La Torre and Aponte write of a religious pioneer named Juan L. Lugo who converted to Pentecostal Christianity in 1913 in Hawaii: “Lugo returned to the city of Ponce in Puerto Rico in 1916, bringing with him a Pentecostal understanding of the gospel” (2001: 100). This return only bolstered the Pentecostal community in Puerto Rico. Nevertheless, recent works such as Luis Martínez-Fernández’s Protestantism and Political Conflict in the Nineteenth-Century Hispanic Caribbean have revealed that the Protestant experience in this region was more than just foreign and imperialistic in nature. Indeed, Protestantism has a conflicted history in this area of the world, a history linked to movements as divergent as Manifest Destiny and Abolition, and it is this ambivalent depiction of Protestantism that Julio rejects in this novel.

The established history of Protestantism demonstrates the strong roots of this faith, which has been on the rise in the Puerto Rican population both on and off the island since 1950. Avalos asserts that “some scholars estimate that over 10 percent of Puerto Ricans in New York were Protestant already by the 1970s, with Pentecostal varieties being dominant”; and that about 20.7 percent of Puerto Ricans born on the mainland are Protestant (2003: 96). The basic beliefs of Pentecostalism truly distinguish it from other variant denominations of Protestantism. Pentecostal faith stresses “that miracles and other supernatural phenomena (for example, speaking in tongues, faith healing, and Holy Spirit baptism) depicted in early Christianity are still achievable and should be actively cultivated” (Avalos 2003: 97). Although these beliefs focus on the transcendental elements of life, the reasons why Protestantism in general appeals to Latinos are anything but other worldly. Avalos postulates that the appeal of Protestantism centers on practical reasons:

Protestant churches were often willing to train and provide Hispanic ministers for Hispanic congregations, even while trying to “Americanize” them. ... Switching to Protestantism also may be part of assimilation to American culture, which is perceived to be predominately Protestant. Moreover, Protestants may use aggressive methods of proselytizing that cater to social needs. (2003: 98)

Protestantism functions as a responsive faith to the urgent needs of the Latino/a community; in providing ministers of the same cultural background and addressing social issues, it is logical that Latino/as would opt to become Protestants. Although such moves speed up the questionable process of Americanization, assimilation is still a powerful reason for religious conversion. Perhaps for these very reasons, Julio’s mother was drawn to Pentecostalism, and in turn, offered this faith to her husband and son. Julio does describe how he found peace and safety at least for a short time in the church as a child. Despite the dominant presence of Pentecostalism in the Puerto Rican community and his positive childhood experiences, Julio falls away from Pentecostalism not only because of the fires that he and his family endure but also because of the socioeconomic critique asserted by the Pentecostal and Protestant churches in New York City.
Julio’s most compelling reason for leaving his faith focuses on the reality of his community’s class status when compared to nearby neighborhoods. While driving Maritza and a female from her congregation to a woman’s clinic, Julio remembers another reason why he began to drift away from the church:

In a silent car, I think about how the Upper East Side always reminds me of when I was a teenager and I started to realize I was being lied to. I believed in “The Truth” back then, and these people walking around the Upper East Side were people who were destined to be destroyed by God. These rich people were sinners and didn’t love their children, because they were not walking in the ways of Jehovah God and their thoughts were not His thoughts. … Yet I walked around the East Side and saw how these people too, had churches and they, too, believed in God, and they, too, took their children to church. (Quiñonez 2004: 60)

Julio recalls the moment where he realized his religion was not in fact the only way to worship God. These Upper East Side elite, who appeared to be godless, had their own valid faith and churches even if they were not Pentecostal. Moreover, the only factor that separated these two communities was socioeconomic class. When Julio considers this truth, he articulates a harsh though flawed critique of his faith:

These people were Christians like me, believed in the same Christian God as I did. The Upper East Side and Spanish Harlem were two neighborhoods that existed back to back and were like the prince and pauper. But our Christian God was the same. And our God was supposed to love us the same. Our God was supposed to bless us the same. We were supposed to live by his word and take part in the same blessings. But that’s not what I saw. (Quiñonez 2004: 61)

Julio’s criticism implies that God doles out material wealth; thus, all good and noble people should be able to partake in these riches, and that is not what Julio witnesses. He sees how his family and community struggle on a daily basis in not only earning a living but in keeping what meager living quarters that they have. The stark reality of class differences prompts Julio to slowly leave the Pentecostal Church in his heart and mind. The fires that he, his family, and his community endure only heat the edges of his criticism and growing bitterness.

In the beginning of the novel, when he sets fire to a client’s house, Julio explains how his faith connects to the social reality of his neighborhood:

Because every time I start a fire, I think of my religious upbringing. … Tongues of fire. And His angry presence was evident around a neighborhood that kept burning night after night. So often that the fires were disregarded and the people branded as sinners. In the news, we were being punished for being junkies, thieves, whores and murderers. The evidence of God’s wrath was the blocks upon blocks of burned buildings we supposedly brought on ourselves. In my church, it was a sign, these fires that consumed Spanish Harlem, the South Bronx, Harlem, Bed-Sty, you name the ghetto, it was being lit up. It was a sign, a pox on our houses, these fires were evidence of prophecy, of fulfillment, of … “The Truth.” (Quiñonez 2004: 11-2)

In Pentecostalism, the “truth” bases itself strictly on biblical content, and the criminal element of Spanish Harlem would seem to validate the fires as punishment
according to Pentecostal beliefs. Moreover, the media and society view the fires in these “ghetto” areas as justice served on the impoverished and criminals of these neighborhoods; these events become commonplace and easily forgotten. Julio’s religious views and the views of society and the media are in synch. Horrible occurrences such as these fires would not happen unless sinners deserved such treatment.

The idea of how these fires can be a punishment from God, a God who imparts wealth on an unequal basis, further propels Julio away from the Pentecostal church and draws him into arson. When Julio tells Helen, the woman he dates, the truth about his occupation, he openly informs her of the significance of his actions: “I’ve done things,’ I say, putting my drink down as well, ‘I set fires not just for money but out of some sort of vengeance, an anger I have. When I was a kid, the property you are standing on top of was worthless. Many landlords burned their own buildings for the insurance” (Quiñonez 2004: 176). Significantly, Julio often talks of his arson as vengeance, yet his acts also implicate him in the process of gentrification. He goes on to explain how, despite his family’s involvement and belief in the Pentecostal church, they were not safe from the fires: “[B]ack then we lived sandwiched between a Pentecostal church and a Jehovah’s Witnesses Kingdom Hall. My mother believed that fire would never touch us, because we lived next to people who loved God and he would protect us” (Quiñonez 2004: 177). Julio’s family had to relocate several times as Spanish Harlem and the South Bronx burned in the late 1970s and early 1980s, according to the city’s idea of Planned Shrinkage (Quiñonez 2004: 176). Interestingly, although Julio’s memory demonstrates how Pentecostals and Jehovah Witnesses suffer through these fires, Julio only concerns himself with how Pentecostalism failed him and his family. God did not protect Julio and his parents, as his mother believed. He turns to arson as a way to secure justice.

Besides allowing for productive connections to Pentecostalism and Santeria, Julio’s use of fire is biblical and definitive, an equal measure to be used against the God who allowed the fiery dislocation of his family and others. Moreover, arson can be a crime of pathology or protest depending on the particular crime’s motive; arsonists and their motives can be divided into six categories: “those who commit arson for vandalism, for excitement, for revenge, and for profit, those who commit arson to conceal other crimes, and extremists” (Holmes and Holmes 1996: 104). Julio’s acts fit somewhere between for revenge and for profit; both of these motives deem his crimes to be of protest. His actions result from a desire to achieve justice by protesting society’s plans of urbanization. The needs for money, revenge, and justice are fulfilled by acts of arson. His vengeance targets specifically the two entities that have failed him: his Pentecostal God and New York City. In Julio’s confession to Helen, he acknowledges a connection between the religious and social conflicts which he and his community face. His falling away from Pentecostalism is produced by ties to social grievances of his childhood that have never been addressed: poverty and dislocation. These problems are still evident in the urban renewal plans of Spanish Harlem.

The Burning Situation of Gentrification

Present patterns of gentrification are the consequence of the past fires that plagued Spanish Harlem. This neighborhood’s once worthless properties are prime locations for new businesses. Julio reflects on the sad ramifications of such a pattern:

Chain stores rise like monsters from a lake. Gap. Starbucks. Blockbuster Video. Old Navy. Like the new Berlin, El Barrio is being rebuilt from its ashes. The rents are
absurdly high, and it breaks my heart because Spanish Harlem had always been a
springboard. A place where immigrants came to better themselves and, when they
had reached the next plateau, they'd leave traces of their culture, a bit of themselves
behind, and move on. A melting pot of past success stories—Dutch, Jews, Irish,
Italians. (Quiñonez 2004: 7)

The revamping of Spanish Harlem, a unique neighborhood with great historical
significance for various immigrant communities in New York City, slowly
homogenizes this neighborhood into another commercial hub. Julio phrases this
sentiment best when he asserts, “El Barrio was no longer my barrio, and the past
seemed irretrievable” (Quiñonez 2004: 16). History that is important to the city
is being lost as well as the cultural and historical importance of this neighborhood
to the Puerto Rican community. Again, Julio explains the tremendous loss here:
“I know, all neighborhoods must change, but if you are Puerto Rican and need to
learn where you come from and who you are, you need to start in Spanish Harlem.
The spiritual landmarks are still here, in El Barrio” (Quiñonez 2004: 53). The Puerto
Rican community loses large parts of itself because faceless corporations that do not
care about historical and cultural continuity buy buildings in Spanish Harlem.

**HISTORY THAT IS IMPORTANT TO THE CITY IS BEING LOST AS WELL AS THE CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE OF THIS NEIGHBORHOOD TO THE PUERTO RICAN COMMUNITY.**

So what can help preserve the cultural and historical significance of Julio’s
neighborhood? The subject of religion can be central to the project of maintaining the
ethnic and cultural integrity of Spanish Harlem. In her work, *Latino Pentecostal Identity*,
Arlene M. Sánchez Walsh asserts there is a significant yet ambivalent relationship between
religious and ethnic identity for Latino Pentecostals: “On the one hand, they tend
to subsume their ethnic identity under the rubric of their religious identity. ... On
the other hand, Latino Pentecostals/charismatics bolster their ethnic identity by
retaining and teaching their language, founding churches that cater to their constituencies,
and teaching their children about their history” (2003: 1). I would argue that the portrait
of Latino Pentecostals in this novel supports Sánchez Walsh’s notion of a subsumed
ethnic identity because the members of Julio’s family and other Pentecostals of Spanish
Harlem do little to assert their ethnic integrity and pride in order to deter the process of
gentrification. Indeed, Helen notes as much when she describes the community meeting
she attended: “Well there were about twelve people there. Just twelve, Julio. I’m saying
to myself, they talk all this stuff about gentrification and they don’t really give a hoot.
Look at these empty seats. Not only that but the board meeting wasn’t about white people
Such ambivalence highlights the overall significance of religion for Spanish Harlem; and in particular, it begins to explain the preference Julio feels for Santeria. Julio needs to turn to some system of meaning that can teach him and his community about productively enduring a period of oppression, about strength and survival. What better system of meaning than Santeria can Julio turn to in order to learn such qualities?

Santeria as Alternative to Pentecostalism for Survival

Besides Pentecostalism as it is represented by his mother and childhood memories, Santeria, as it is represented by Julio’s neighbor Papelito, also competes for Julio’s devotion. Julio has great respect for Papelito and the religion he practices: “As a high priest, a babalawo, of Regla Lukumi, better known as Santeria, Papelito is feared and loved by many” (Quiñonez 2004: 33). According to Julio, Papelito is the only flamboyant gay man to walk the streets of Spanish Harlem untouched. The history and origins of Santeria also command Julio’s respect: “It’s a religion of poet priests yanked out of their beloved Africa and forced to embrace not just slavery in the new world but also Catholicism. And so these poet priests preserved their religion by hiding their gods inside Catholic saints. The Spaniards bought the hustle, and, in time, the two religions merged, forming the way of the saints, Santeria” (Quiñonez 2004: 76). It is the strength and resilience of Santeria that Julio finds appealing, although its appeal is not universal.

African culture composes a large part of the practice of Santeria, and it is this heritage that Julio’s mother deems unacceptable. She calls Papelito, “hijo del Diablo” (Quiñonez 2004: 21), son of the devil, due to his involvement with Santeria. Her condemnation of Papelito and Santeria has echoes of racism and directly emphasizes the racial discourses in this novel. Interestingly, although Protestantism was “influenced by West African religious practices and beliefs” (Martínez-Fernández 2002: 2), it, along with Pentecostalism, still gets coded as Eurocentric, especially when in comparison with Santeria. Consequently, even Julio’s mother’s preference for Pentecostalism over Santeria reflects a racial bias, for she is also quick to push Julio toward their new neighbor, the white woman named Helen. Julio does date Helen, but he questions his relationship with her on the basis of race, especially when he considers the ramifications of dating a white woman while his neighborhood endures the gentrification process primarily initiated by Anglo society. Indeed, Julio’s relationship with Helen evokes questions about race that are addressed throughout the novel. Nevertheless, Julio remains drawn to Santeria, and in a bid to know more about Santeria, he inquires about Papelito’s devotion. Papelito responds, “Regla Lukumi is really the patakis, the stories I have chosen to live my life by. ... Yes, powerful stories that teach me how to experience life, my life. How to live my life within nature and my community.... These stories are really our search for truth, for meaning, for significance. These stories are us in disguise” (Quiñonez 2004: 78). This description of Santeria only draws Julio closer to it and further alienates him from Pentecostalism.

Santeria’s attribute of endurance attracts Julio. He describes how this faith bases itself on outlasting unthinkable oppression:

“A religion born out of a need for survival, of diversity, of color and magic. The Dark Continent was in our blood and Africa’s religions were part of our cultural heritage. Like the blood of our people, Santeria became one with so many other things in order to survive. It adapted and transformed itself into something new. (Quiñonez 2004: 76)
Julio identifies with this quality of survival since he and his community have been practicing Santeria and need to continue to do so if they are to halt the process of gentrification. Julio and Spanish Harlem both need to unite neighbors, communal leaders, and businesses if they are to survive. Change for a person, neighborhood, culture, and a city is inevitable, but Julio and Spanish Harlem need to discover ways of being part of the change and not having the change foisted upon them. In *Barrio Dreams*, Arlene Dávila explores how discourses of cultural and ethnic integrity can be both challenges and facilitators to the process of gentrification in Spanish Harlem. Ultimately, Dávila arrives at the same conclusion about gentrification that Julio does: “Theirs [the Puerto Rican and Latino culture brokers] is a vision that impels their rightful inclusion in these new developments, as home owners, planners, and consultants, as artists and creators and equal beneficiaries of economic development” (2004: 214). In the hopes of achieving adaptability, longevity, and communal inclusion in urban renewal plans, Julio ponders a conversion from Pentecostalism to Santeria: “And I am on the brink of exchanging my stories, my religion for a new one. Things look bright” (Quiñonez 2004: 113). Although it has been years since Julio has worshipped in the Pentecostal church, he still claims it as his religion, but he is open to following a new, versatile spiritual path that can encourage the survival of himself and his community. It appears that Pentecostalism is the religion of his past and Santeria is the religion of his future.

**CHANGE FOR A PERSON, NEIGHBORHOOD, CULTURE, AND A CITY IS INEVITABLE, BUT JULIO AND SPANISH HARLEM NEED TO DISCOVER WAYS OF BEING PART OF THE CHANGE AND NOT HAVING THE CHANGE FOISTED UPON THEM.**

*Agency through Santeria*

Papelito’s botanica, a store for the religious paraphernalia of Santeria and thus the novel’s main site of worship for this faith, is a communal and feminine space, almost maternal in the protection it offers, and Julio notes these characteristics right away. When Julio visits Papelito to ask him for a consultation, he describes how the botanica and women are affiliated closely: “And it is always full of women. The place weeps femininity. Women walk in and out of Papelito’s botanica as if it was a beauty parlor. They adore Papelito, because he’d let women in on Yoruba secrets. He makes them love potions for their men, or spells for women they hate” (Quiñonez 2004: 70). Most important, besides being a place where women can gather and seek advice, the botanica and Papelito enable the women of Julio’s neighborhood to combat injustice.
While Maritza and Julio are arguing over Trompo Loco’s living situation (in a condemned building with squatters), Helen comes in and tells Maritza that Papelito and a group of women gathering outside the building need her. These women tell Helen to bring Maritza and a broom. This request for a broom triggers a significant realization: “Maritza looks back at us. Her face turns pale in total horror. Something about that broom makes the entire household shake with fears as if it wasn’t a broom she has been asked to find but a gun” (Quiñonez 2004: 166). Maritza realizes that the request for the broom signifies immediate danger. She borrows the broom of Julio’s mother and proceeds downstairs. Interestingly, Julio offers to accompany Maritza, but she responds in the negative: “‘No, you can’t, Julio,’ she says nervously and looks at Helen. ‘It has to be handled by us’” (Quiñonez 2004: 166). Implicit in this refusal of assistance is the notion that gender identity outweighs racial/ethnic identity. This is not to suggest that racial and ethnic identity do not matter but that gender identity has priority over these factors.³ Maritza accepts Helen’s assistance but not Julio’s offer. Whatever problems have arisen outside the building, they need to be addressed by women, regardless of racial/ethnic identity, but the further connection between Santeria and gender does not happen until Papelito appears on the scene.

Once Helen and Maritza arrive downstairs, they find Papelito waiting with the crowd of the women; as a gay man, Papelito presents a more fluid notion of gender identity and therefore can be part of this group. Papelito indicates to Maritza why the women have gathered: a neighborhood man has physically harmed his daughter again. The women and Papelito track this man down to a local store and circle about him: “Led by Maritza and Papelito, the women begin to swat him with their brooms. Instead of fighting back, the man drops his beer and runs. The women chase him, swatting him with their brooms and mops. He stumbles down and gets back up, tries to run again, but stops and finally faces the women” (Quiñonez 2004: 167). At this point, the choice of brooms is clear. Here, brooms are effective domestic weapons to be used by women to achieve justice.

The specifics of this man’s crimes are revealed; he is infected with the HIV virus and has repeatedly sexually abused his daughter, thereby most likely infecting her as well (Quiñonez 2004: 168–9). When the women are circled around this man and his daughter and wife are in each other’s arms, Papelito performs a ritual for them:

Papelito digs into the pocket of his gown. He brings out a cigar and lights it. He expertly blows out enough smoke that quickly surrounds us all. Papelito then begins to blow smoke and speak in a dialect none in the crowd understands. Papelito digs in his pockets again. He hurls some white powder at the husband’s face. It rains down on the husband’s head, sprinkling his head with a touch of white chalk. The husband doesn’t move. He breathes so hard I can hear every angry breath. He is so enraged that silent, defeated tears roll down his face. (Quiñonez 2004: 170)

At this moment, in front of the very attacker of this young girl, Papelito uses cigar smoke and prayer in a cleansing and protective gesture.⁴ In this action, Papelito demonstrates Santeria to be a protective and communal faith that is concerned with the welfare of women. After this ritual, the women disband and go to Maritza’s church; the man is left defeated and alone on the streets. He goes on his knees and prays before a neighborhood barbershop, and the men of the barbershop reject him. One barber throws a pitcher of water on him and tells him to move along before he gets worse treatment from the barbers themselves; they saw and heard all that has
transpired. Significantly, the barbershop, a traditional locale of masculinity and male camaraderie, juxtaposes with the community of women gathered, and both reject the offending man. Nevertheless, the portrait of Santeria as a communal and empowering practice, particularly for the disempowered of society—women and children—remains, and it is to this faith that Julio turns to for some type of agency in his life.

EDDIE SUMMARIZES THIS SITUATION OF CITY PLANNING, ARSON, AND INSURANCE FRAUD BEST WHEN HE AFFIXES BLAME FOR THE FIRES IN NEW YORK CITY: “THE REAL VILLAIN IN ALL OF THIS WAS THE MAN BEHIND THE MEN WHO HIRED ME. MOSES. ROBERT MOSES. HE RELOCATED PEOPLE LIKE CATTLE.”

Near the conclusion of the novel, two different men blackmail Julio. Due to a mistake on Julio’s part in his last assignment, his arson boss, Eddie, refuses to let him go before completing one major job, either burn his own apartment building down or burn down some buildings in Washington, DC. Moreover, Mario, an undercover cop on the construction site where Julio also works, is investigating Maritza for the disappearance of a substantial number of naturalization papers. Mario corners Julio and demands his help in finding the papers and arresting his childhood friend. Troubles abound for Julio, and he turns to the only source of agency he has in his life: Santeria. He goes to Papelito and asks for help; Papelito knows Julio is in grave danger, and he tells Julio to buy three statues of specific deities or orishas. When Julio asks why, Papelito responds: “Because, mi amor, these three are warriors. They eat anything.” Papelito answers in that delicate voice of his as he places books filled with specific prayers for each Orisha. ‘And from the look in your eyes, you are going to need warriors’ (Quiñonez 2004: 188). Indeed, Julio needs warriors on his side. These warrior deities will eat any trouble that Julio faces if he believes in them and utilizes them correctly. With Eddie and Mario against him, Julio feels increasing pressure to continue in his arson activities and great concern about his relationships with family and friends. He turns to faith in this moment of crisis; however, Santeria is not enough to avert trouble for Julio, at least not the way he has been using it.

Julio’s partial adherence to Santeria does not oppose dominant Anglo society, as it is represented by Eddie the crime boss and Mario the cop. Early in the novel, right after he meets Helen, Papelito asks Julio for a full commitment to Santeria:
“‘I’m happy for you,’ he says. ‘Pero mi amor, what you really need to do, Julio, is examine yourself and decide if you want to start your path toward saintliness, toward the way of the saints. Toward letting Yoruba stories guide your life” (Quiñonez 2004: 110). Julio makes no response to this clear question, but his actions show a lack of devotion. He makes all the right purchases of candles, statues, books, and offerings but does not commit himself to learning the way of the saints, of undertaking the *asiento* ceremony. This attitude does not change until the end of the novel. Therefore, the challenges of dominant society as they are present in the worlds of organized crime and law enforcement overwhelm Julio. Without a full commitment from him to the faith, he cannot oppose all those who would oppress him and his community.

Julio’s oppressors include Eddie, Mario, the Pentecostal church, and finally Robert Moses, for major strands of urban planning discrimination can be traced back to him. From the 1920s to the 1960s, Moses had immeasurable influence over the planning of New York City, from its suburban parks to its infrastructure and city housing. However, the plans he facilitated were critiqued often for exhibiting clear class and racial biases. His early efforts at planning parks were not free of these prejudices: “Moses’ parks, particularly those constructed in areas quite distant from the cities, were clearly for middle-class white citizens. This claim is given credence by the deliberate discouragement of bus transit through a variety of design tactics” (Lewis 1980: 185).

Because of this history of practices, which only continued as Moses’ career developed, Eddie specifically credits Robert Moses as the architect of the Urban Renewal or Planned Shrinkage of New York City even as this process continued after Moses’ time in office. Moses’ efforts at renewal during the 1930s to the 1950s only helped to create the circumstances that encouraged the burning down of “worthless” properties in ghetto neighborhoods of the South Bronx, Harlem, and Spanish Harlem. Eddie summarizes this situation of city planning, arson, and insurance fraud best when he affixes blame for the fires in New York City: “The real villain in all of this was the man behind the men who hired me. Moses. Robert Moses. He relocated people like cattle” (Quiñonez 2004: 160). Echoes of Julio’s earlier comments and his family history can be heard here: how he and his family continually moved away from the fires in order to find a home. Moreover, John J. Betancur attests to how arson facilitates gentrification in neighborhoods such as West Town in Chicago: “Finally, some argued that arson had also become a mechanism of gentrification: It was used to intimidate owners into selling or minorities into leaving, to empty specific properties on the path of gentrification or clear land for future development” (2002: 788). Similar patterns of arson emerge in the history of gentrification of Spanish Harlem, and it is the urban renewal of this neighborhood that leads to the expulsion of Puerto Ricans and Latinos. Consequently, reason and historical records allow Moses to be named the biased Master Builder of New York City then and now; he set policies and practices in place that today work to the detriment of urban communities like Spanish Harlem. Robert Moses and his plans of urban shrinkage become emblematic of the powerful and neglectful attitudes of established society. Thus, the Latina/o community still suffers from the last stage of these urban renewal plans in the problem of gentrification. Latino/as are being priced out of neighborhoods they helped to build and sustain.

What Betancur observes about the disintegration of community in West Town, Chicago also holds true for Spanish Harlem: “The most traumatic aspect of this analysis is perhaps the destruction of the elaborate and complex community fabric that is crucial for low-income, immigrant, and minority communities without any complications”
Betancur further explains how a community's existence depends on factors of economics and politics: "This story certainly shows that the right to community is a function of a group’s economic and political power" (2002: 807). Spanish Harlem lacks the economic and political power to defend its right to exist against the interests of private corporations and public government, and Julio, as one lacking commitment to the communal and protective faith of Santeria, has little reserves to draw strength from in order to challenge gentrification. Julio's aversion to Pentecostalism reflects his aversion to dominant Anglo society; yet his attraction and dabbling in Santeria is not enough to challenge societal progress. Nevertheless, the issue of religion appears central to the project of scaling back gentrification in this novel.

**Confluence of Religious and Social Conflict**

When Julio walks through his neighborhood, he notes the appearance of random chain stores, and it forces him to ask if these streets still belong to his community. According to Julio, one constant in his neighborhood remains:

> The only thing that hasn’t changed are the churches. Some are above shops, others are in basements. Many don’t even look like churches but more like sweatshops or warehouses. Churches don’t go out of fashion in Spanish Harlem. If you have nothing to hope for, you are always going to be poor. And that's where Jesus comes in. He consoles you by stroking your hair. Whispering that every day is a gift, a miracle, your dreams are gold, and you are God’s story. (Quiñonez 2004: 246)

Marx's observation that mainstream religion is the opiate of the masses seems to be the cornerstone of how gentrification unfolds and sustains itself in Spanish Harlem. As long as mainstream churches are around, the poor accept their socioeconomic status: no matter where and how they live, they will not contest the progress of gentrification because they have the love of their God regardless of wealth. Churches keep the people complacent about what happens to them; therefore, as long as they remain in the neighborhood, gentrification can continue unabated. At this point, it may appear that Pentecostalism emerges as the scapegoat. However, I would argue that the focus brought onto Pentecostalism as permissive of the gentrification process only emphasizes the centrality of religion to the community of Spanish Harlem and if anything, singles out the mainstream, organized, and bureaucratic structure of Pentecostalism as reflective of the gentrification process, thereby rendering it problematic and far less preferable than the alternative and ancestral history and structure of Santeria.

If religion is to remain a stronghold despite how the neighborhood changes, perhaps it is time to change the religion that unites a community. Perhaps the Puerto Rican community in New York City, which is known for its high numbers of Pentecostals, should consider adopting a non-mainstream religion such as Santeria that is based on survival and on challenging the norms of dominant society. Julio's dissatisfaction with his religious upbringing and the status of his neighborhood reflects the larger issues of his Puerto Rican community and how the two problems of religion and societal change may be connected. All these conflicting faiths, people, and tensions in Julio's life, however, point him in the same direction in the end.

**Living in the Truth**

The answer to all of Julio's problems seems to be simple. To get out from under Eddie and Mario's threats, to keep his family and friends safe, and to help secure
the future of his neighborhood, Julio must be honest with everyone and go to the authorities, no matter what happens to him, but he cannot do so. The day before Julio commits his final act of arson, he realizes how his actions will lead him to a dead end: “In order for me to hear the song of the Orishas, I have to live in truth. I am so far from that truth that I feel taking baby steps won’t get me anywhere” (Quiñonez 2004: 228). Papelito gives this advice to Julio; he tells Julio to “live in the truth” and to do so Julio must be honest about his spiritual beliefs and livelihood with his family, friends, and himself (Quiñonez 2004: 218). Moreover, in Pentecostalism, following the church’s dogma by placing all your faith in God and establishing one’s own family reflects a “coming back to the truth,” as Julio’s mom explains it (Quiñonez 2004: 20). All spiritual paths and representatives in Julio’s life point him to the same goal: honesty about his life and desires. Nevertheless, Julio cannot commit to this goal; in fact, he feels so far away from truth in his life that any step toward it is not enough in his judgment. Legal and personal consequences keep Julio from taking the productive action of pursuing honesty and justice in his life. Finally, he reaches a compromise.

Julio decides to burn down the building he lives in and tell his neighbors so that they can take the proper precautions rather than commit arson in Washington, DC, where building residents would be unaware of the danger. Julio first tells Helen, but he cannot inform others because Trompo Loco has set the building on fire at the same time as Julio’s conversation with Helen. After overhearing critical discussions and desiring to win Eddie’s (his father’s) approval, Trompo Loco sets fire prematurely and dangerously to the building. Trompo Loco is hurt in the fire but recovers; however, Papelito loses his life in an effort to alert the building’s other residents of the fire. The novel presents this fire as the fatal and inevitable result of Julio’s inability to negotiate successfully spiritual and social tensions and to live in the truth regardless of personal consequences. After the fire, Julio and his parents go back to living in the housing projects, and it appears Julio is left with nothing: Helen breaks away from him; Papelito dies; Maritza leaves town; and Trompo Loco becomes hospitalized. For Julio, all positive possibilities and relationships seem to have disappeared except for the solace of Santeria.

Fires of Salvation
Santeria remains the spiritual practice for Julio, his path to hope. After he and his family settle into the housing projects, Julio seeks out a well-known and humble babalawo in Brooklyn. When Julio meets this man in his botanica and asks about becoming an initiate into Santeria, the babalawo has a firm and harsh reply:

“Oh, yeah. You want to learn. Well what have you done to prove that you are worthy of the saints?”
I told him I have done nothing.
“Then you fucking see me when you have it figured out, and maybe I’ll teach you the ways. Now get the fuck out of my botanica.” (Quiñonez 2004: 269)

Julio returns to his family that night only to be visited unexpectedly by this same man. After being welcomed by the family and joining in a game of Scrabble, this man named Manny tells Julio that he will gladly teach him the ways of the saints since Julio’s former mentor was Papelito, Manny’s teacher as well. Manny recalls how Papelito mentioned and described Julio to him: “That you, Julio Santana, was going to do great
things. That he had seen a fire in you like no one he had ever met. That you were
definitely a son of Chango. Do you know how rare that shit is?” (Quiñonez 2004: 271).
To reiterate, Chango is the deity associated with fire, thunder, lightning, and justice;
Manny’s reassertion that Julio is a son of Chango strengthens the explanation as to
why Julio is attracted to wielding power through fire in his arson activities. It also
potentially explains how Julio may re-envision the use of fire through Santeria in order
to forge community instead of fragment it. Moreover, as has been mentioned before,
fire is a key symbol of the visitation of the Holy Spirit in the Pentecostal faith. Julio
seems to have been fated to have fire be a key symbol in his life, from the Pentecostal
faith of his youth, to his practices of arson, and finally to his identity as a son of
Chango. He is destined to make fire a productive part of his life, and what better way
is there to do this than through Santeria as it is presented in the novel.

Julio explains Manny’s commitment to him and all that he stands to gain from
learning the ways of the saints:

Told me he would lead me until I was ready for the ultimate ceremony of the Asiento,
when, hopefully, if Papelito was right, I would become Chango. And, like in all
intimate relationships, Chango would reveal to me the meaning of his stories, but
only if I’d work in loving the Orisha. If I performed the rituals correctly, Chango would
lead me to know the ways of a god. Chango would teach me to how to love myself and
all living things. (Quiñonez 2004: 271)

Santeria offers Julio ways to love himself and his community; it offers him knowledge
about how to live: what to value and what to protect. This faith would most assuredly
keep him from returning to arson as a way to achieve high wages and a decent
home for himself and his family. He can use fire symbolically through his spiritual
worship and identification to unify his family and community against socioeconomic
problems such as gentrification. Once on his alternative path to religious fulfillment,
the possibility of love also returns to Julio.

Shortly after Manny agrees to teach Julio, Helen visits Julio in his new home.
She has written a letter about their future to him, and she comes to visit personally
so she could tell him that they can see each other again with some restrictions:
“ ‘I don’t trust you, Julio. You or myself. So, we can only meet in public places?’ ”
(Quiñonez 2004: 272). Julio readily agrees, ecstatic to have Helen back in his life.
It appears that a reconnection with Santeria through Manny’s agreement to teach
Julio means a reconnection with Helen. Julio has love back in his life; he regains hope
and receives help ostensibly through Santeria. It bears reiterating here how Papelito
defines Santeria as a set of stories that can guide people’s lives and search for truth.
Through Julio’s recommitment to an education in these stories, the reader sees how
Julio’s passion and fire for faith reflects his renewed relationship with Helen. Love,
education, stories, and storytelling can all work together within Santeria to provide
Julio with a viable future. This faith does not offer blind acceptance or false dreams
at whatever cost; it holds legitimate promises for him, as long as he works hard and is
truthful and dedicated. On a grander scale, Santeria can offer agency so as to enable
a community’s fight against gentrification. The tools are there for Julio to be content
as a person and as a community member; he just has to use them.
Conclusion

*Chango’s Fire* ends with the reunion of Julio and Helen, a final note of hope. Julio resolves to keep seeing Helen and eventually get himself and his parents out of the housing projects. He has done it once before, he believes he can do it again. This ending is significant for many reasons. It shows how Julio and his family are committed to their community of Spanish Harlem. This novel is no tale of upward mobility (leaving Spanish Harlem for the suburbs) or island-bound fantasy (returning to Puerto Rico). Julio and his family, like a great number of non-fictional residents of Spanish Harlem, do not want to leave their home, which is, in many ways, the cradle of Puerto Rican identity. They are steadfast in their desire to keep Spanish Harlem as a fecund site of Puerto Rican history, culture, and community, which in effect makes it a critical bastion of American identity and culture.

**THIS NOVEL IS NO TALE OF UPWARD MOBILITY (LEAVING SPANISH HARLEM FOR THE SUBURBS) OR ISLAND-BOUND FANTASY (RETURNING TO PUERTO RICO).**

Nevertheless, as it is noted time and again in this novel, change, be it in matters of religion or socioeconomic residential patterns, is inevitable; however, what Julio challenges is who gets to plan and participate in this change and how. Although he takes an unproductive and negative path in effecting change and retaliation in his life through acts of arson early in the novel, Julio comes to re-envision his path and goals through Santeria. Perhaps now that he is on his way to becoming an initiate of Santeria, he can draw upon new inner spiritual reserves of power in order to unite his community and counteract the gentrification process; religious and ethnic identity are linked significantly for Julio. He seeks a religious identity that allows him to more strongly assert and preserve his ethnic identity. Regardless of where the future may take Julio, his family and community, and Helen, the reader sees him seeking out Santeria as a method of agency and also sees that his aversion to the Pentecostal faith of his youth mirrors an aversion to the dominant Anglo society that is responsible for the gentrification of his Spanish Harlem. In the end though, Julio describes himself as full of “hope and light” (Quiñonez 2004: 273). The fires of his Santeria faith, and not his arson activities, light his way and give him hope for himself and all of Spanish Harlem.
NOTES

1 Two notable points here. First, reasons for the use of multiple identity labels for the population under study need to be given. Although I recognize the changing demographics of Spanish Harlem to include recent immigrants from Mexico, I use “Puerto Rican” to address the historical and majority population of Spanish Harlem. I employ “Latino/a” when I wish to make observations that are applicable to a larger population that is of Latin American descent. The authors of the quoted reference materials in this essay use “Hispanic” primarily and other labels of identity for their own reasons and points to be made. I do not use the label “Nuyorican” to refer to Puerto Ricans in New York City because Quiñonez uses “Latino” and “Puerto Rican” predominately in the novel. Second, Arlene M. Sánchez Walsh complicates the portrayal of a responsive and supportive Protestant faith in her work *Latino Pentecostal Identity*. Her work will be addressed more thoroughly later in the essay.

2 Although this quote relays an accurate but succinct description of the African Diaspora religion of Santeria, for more thorough and exhaustive studies on Santeria, please refer to any one of the following works: Joseph M. Murphy’s *Santeria: An African Religion in America*, *Santeria: African Spirits in America*, or *Working the Spirit*; Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert’s *Sacred Possessions*; George Brandon’s *Santeria from Africa to the New World: The Dead Sell Memories*; Michael Atwood Mason’s *Living Santería: Rituals and Experiences in an Afro-Cuban Religion*; or selected texts by Natalia Bolivar Aróstegui. Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert give the best working definition of Santeria: “A complex religious system whose beliefs and rituals rest on the veneration of the orichas of the Yoruba pantheon of Nigeria as identified with their corresponding Catholic saints. Santería is founded on a concept of a superior triumvirate of Olofi, Olodumare, and Olorun, who have authority over the rest but are not the object of direct adoration or worship, as are the orichas, who are their subjects and messengers on earth” (1997: 288). Santeria’s strongest historical roots are in Cuba but it also has a substantial background in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, namely Puerto Rico, hence the presence of Santería in Spanish Harlem.

3 For example, in Santeria, according to Joseph M. Murphy in *Working the Spirit*, the largest spiritual communities are often led by men and the spiritual leaders with the most well-known reputations are men (1994: 87). Also in *Momentos, Artifacts, and Hallucinations from the Ethnographer’s Tent*, Katherine Hagedorn discusses how her gender identity was a hindrance in trying to learn batá drumming, music within the context of Santeria (2002: 34). Gender does matter more than race and ethnicity in what can be permitted and facilitated within Santeria.

4 The use of cigar smoke to cleanse is a common practice in Santeria.

5 Two notable points here again. First, the *asiento* ceremony is the usually private initiation ceremony into Santeria. Second, Quiñonez articulates an implicit yet ironic critique of commodification/gentrification here. Julio makes the correct purchases of the paraphernalia of Santeria (books, candles, and statues) but he cannot give himself over to the religion. Now Santeria is known and criticized widely as an expensive and highly commodified religion. However, Julio’s purchases are not in error; it is his lack of spiritual devotion in accordance with his purchases. Julio’s use of Santeria mirrors the problem of gentrification. The new property owners of Spanish Harlem give their money over quite easily but cannot give of themselves to understand the vital need to maintain the Puerto Rican identity of this community. The economic boost is not in error here; it is the intentions and planning of this urban renewal that need reconsideration.

REFERENCES


