





FIGURE 1. Renoly Santiago in *Ominous Men* (2016), written by Desi Moreno-Penson, directed by Lorca Peress, MultiStages co-presentation with the Theater at the 14th Street Y, New York, October 19–November 3, 2019. Photo courtesy of John Quilty.

# Does the Bronx Have a Taste for Monsters?

*Nuyorican Gothic's* Playwright  
Desi Moreno-Penson

**A. J. MUHAMMAD**

**N***uyorican Gothic* is a multi-play cycle written by the dramatist Desi Moreno-Penson, who describes the overarching project as “dark, stylized, and fantastical plays that are set in the Bronx, featuring Gothic themes, heightened, poetic language and specifically ‘Nuyorican’ characters.” The *Nuyorican Gothic* cycle begins with *Devil Land*, a psychological and supernatural thriller, which premiered in 2007 via the Summer Play Festival, a New York City–based company that produced the work of emerging multicultural playwrights. *Devil Land* was subsequently published in 2011. This contemporary story takes place in the basement of a Bronx building and centers on Destiny, a young girl who is abducted by a couple: the fanatical, repressed, and mentally ill Beatriz and her pedophilic husband, Americo, who is also the building’s superintendent. Moreno-Penson followed up *Devil Land* with the second play in the cycle, *Comida de Puta (F%king Lousy Food)*, an adaptation of the play *Hippolytus* by Euripides that fuses Greek tragedy with African cosmology, a multimedia component, and live music. In *Comida de Puta* Moreno-Penson replaces Greek gods with Yoruba deities and sets the play in the modern-day Bronx, where Laluz, a vengeful Santeria-practicing Puerto Rican woman, incurs the wrath of Oshun (the deity of love, female sexuality, and rivers), who places a curse on Laluz by making her lust after her teenage stepson, Sotero. This sets off a deadly chain reaction that ensnares Laluz, Sotero, and Sotero’s father (and Laluz’s husband), Viejo, who is the owner of a dilapidated corner bodega. The play also includes the ap-

pearance of other Orishas from the Yoruba pantheon who haunt Laluz, including Oyá, the deity of wind and hurricanes, and Elegguá, the trickster who is also the deity of the crossroads. By drawing upon the lives of her characters at the intersection of their gender, sexuality, spirituality, and religious practices (Catholicism and Santería), Moreno-Penson illuminates the interiority of her Latinx characters and exposes their inner demons that sometimes manifest psychically and physically.

I served as the production dramaturg for *Comida de Puta*, which was the winner of MultiStages Theater's New Works contest in 2013, directed by MultiStages Theater's founder and president, Lorca Peress, and produced in New York City in 2015. I recall Moreno-Penson's explaining the meaning of the title to the cast and creative team. The literal translation of the title is "whore food" or "prostitute's food." The play is set in a run-down bodega that serves food that would be described colloquially as *comida de puta*: an improvised meal made by working-class Nuyoricans or other people of Latinx descent from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean that is assembled with no more than two or three ingredients or whatever is immediately available. The meal is not nutritious, hence "lousy food," but it satisfies one's hunger. Typically, a *comida de puta* meal would include scrambled eggs mixed with white rice that could either be cooked or reheated. Ketchup may be used as a condiment. Not only does the phrase *comida de puta* signify the menial labor done by disenfranchised women (including women of African descent) such as

## **MORENO-PENSON ILLUMINATES THE INTERIORITY OF HER LATINX CHARACTERS AND EXPOSES THEIR INNER DEMONS THAT SOMETIMES MANIFEST PSYCHICALLY AND PHYSICALLY**

cleaning, cooking, and sex work, it has circulated from the subculture to the larger culture. In this way, *Comida de Puta* elaborates on *Devil Land's* incorporation of gothic and supernatural aspects to foreground Latina, Black, and Indigenous girls and young women. *Devil Land* focuses on the disappearance of these women and the lack of response to this crisis from law enforcement and mainstream media, specifically in comparison to the disappearance of Caucasian women like Gabby Petito, who went missing during a cross-country trip during the summer of 2021. Lamenting the limited attention and resources devoted to stories about abducted and missing women who are Latina, Black, and Indigenous, the late journalist Gwen Ifill described the disproportionate coverage of missing white women that dominates national news cycles and looms large in the public imagination as "missing white woman syndrome."<sup>1</sup>

In *Devil Land, Comida de Puta, and Ominous Men*, Moreno-Penson examines Puerto Rican and Taino identity and Indigenous presence in the Western Hemisphere via the Gothic. In her scholarship on the Gothic, Maisha L. Wester describes the contradictions of this genre as they relate to authors from the African diaspora. On one hand, she states, white Gothic authors “employ metaphors of monstrosity and animality to meditate upon the place and nature of the racial other.”<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the problem faced by Black writers who have appropriated the Gothic “is starkly similar to the problem of Creole, a form in which modern black subjects write resistance to colonial domination by adapting the dominator’s language.”<sup>3</sup> Wester’s discussion of writers from the African diaspora includes voices from the Francophone and Anglophone Caribbean but rarely those from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, although Guadeloupean author Maryse Condé and Jamaican born writer Nalo Hopkinson, treated in the chapter “Black Diasporic Gothic,” are notable exceptions. Still, Wester relies on Caribbean theorist Édouard Glissant to describe, as Wester puts it, the “radical Creolised forms which destabilise their bases and dismantle constructions of Black diasporic population as mere composites of Indigenous and colonising cultures, with the indigene responsible for adapting to and utilising the colonising culture.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Wester contends that numerous Black diasporic authors are exemplifying Glissant’s radical vision and are creating texts that defamiliarize (white) Western

Gothic readers by “switching paradigms, thus removing them from the traditional language of the genre’s discourses and tropes and introducing monsters from black folk traditions, rather than reinventing traditional monsters from the European Gothic.”<sup>5</sup> In this essay I extend Wester’s frame to encompass Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans, whose racial triad includes a blend of Spanish, African, and Taino ancestry, by turning attention to *Nuyorican Gothic* and Moreno-Penson, a Nuyorican dramatist, actor, dramaturg, and producer whose artistry has been presented on stages in New York City and regionally for decades.<sup>6</sup>

### **A Nuyorican State of Mind**

The term *Nuyorican* refers to Puerto Ricans who were born and raised in New York City but also to an identity and cultural movement that developed in response to the linkages between both the African American and Puerto Rican communities, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, which saw the civil rights movement and the ascendancy of the Black Power movement and later the Young Lords Party. Latinx scholars, including Raquel Z. Rivera, Juan Flores, Miriam Jiménez-Román, Johanna Fernandez, and others, have documented Puerto Rican and African Americans’ shared experience living as marginalized people in New York City in the mid-twentieth century, advocating for improved housing, employment, education, and other services.<sup>7</sup> Rivera, who has written about hip-hop at the intersections of blackness, Latinidad, and gender, states, “Points of separation arise be-

tween African Americans and Puerto Ricans, but there is a shared fundamental exclusion from white middle-class world. . . . Their residential and work-related proximity, high poverty levels and similar historical experiences and cultural legacies have foregrounded the commonalities of their struggles.”<sup>8</sup> Moreover, scholar-activist Jiménez-Román writes that “second generation and third generation Puerto Ricans grew up with African Americans, meeting in the schools and streets, on the stoops, in the *bodegas*, and at the dance halls.”<sup>9</sup> The cultural output that emerged from the shared struggles of African Americans and Puerto Ricans includes hip-hop/rap and the musical genres boogaloo and Latin jazz.<sup>10</sup>

To contextualize the Nuyorican aesthetic and the layered linguistics that define the complexity of Moreno-Penson’s *Nuyorican Gothic* cycle, her work must be placed in the lineage of her predecessors, including the late Puerto Rican poet Miguel Algarín, who—along with his peers Miguel Piñero, Sandra María Estevez, Pedro Pietri, and others—ushered in a new form that drew inspiration from the Black Arts Movement and codified the evolution of a culture and language that impacted and inspired waves of artists in the decades that followed. Algarín’s Nuyorican Poets Cafe, which is based in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, has been an institution for over four decades, hosting performers and dramatists and often multidisciplinary artists like Moreno-Penson. Audiences experiencing plays in the *Nuyorican Gothic* cycle, whether watching them in performance or

reading the scripts, will encounter characters who switch from speaking poetic and heightened dialogue in English with some Spanish words, phrases, or entire sentences in Spanish, to Spanglish, and then back to English.

In the book *Nuyorican Feminist Performance: From the Cafe to Hip Hop Theater*, scholar Patricia Herrera counters the sexism and politics that undergirded the Nuyorican poetry scene of 1970s and the founding of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe by bringing the work of lesser-known Nuyorican women poets including Sandra María Estevez to the fore. Herrera also elucidates the Nuyorican experience, identity, and aesthetic that drove this cultural movement, explaining that it was the 1975 publication of Miguel Piñero and Miguel Algarín’s *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings* that helped to popularize the term *Nuyorican*. Piñero and Algarín’s collection was the first anthology “to feature the works of poets either born in or culturally connected to Puerto Rico and living in New York City. Poets used the term *Nuyorican* as a mode of writing, speaking, feeling, and creating identity.”<sup>11</sup>

The term *Nuyorican* transcends the spatial and geographical boundaries of New York City and Puerto Rico. Herrera adds that “it is a way of being—how individuals practice and embody Nuyoricaness through culture, language and the spaces that they inhabit.”<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Algarín defined a Nuyorican as “1. Originally Puerto Rican epithet for those of Puerto Rican heritage born in New York:

their Spanish was different (Spanglish), their way of dress is different. They were a stateless people (like most U.S. poets) until the [Nuyorican Poets] Cafe became their homeland. 2. After Algarin and Piñero, a proud poet speaking New York Puerto Rican. 3. A denizen of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe. 4. New York's riches."<sup>13</sup> Inspired by the first wave of Nuyorican poets, like Piñero, Algarin, and Jaime Carerro, who came to prominence in the 1970s, Moreno-Penson writes characters "speaking in Spanglish to demonstrate how Neo-/Nuyoricans negotiate two cultures and languages to express themselves," and "this duality helps construct a sense of home, despite the experiences of displacement, alienation, and questionable citizenship."<sup>14</sup>

### The Bronx Is Burning

Sky in the Bronx, man, the one out on the Concourse . . . it's something else . . . lights different, you know . . . hangs over you like an open belly, just like today . . . strange lights in the clouds, keep digging up and down, like gray bleach and whipped cream trying to blend into the concrete . . . it's weird, brother! Can't explain it, but beautiful you know, not like other places in the city.

—Moreno-Penson, *Ominous Men*

Moreno-Penson's third play in the *Nuyorican Gothic* cycle, *Ominous Men*, was produced a few months before the global health pandemic struck in 2020. Moreno-Penson reunited with MultiStages' Lorca Peress, who staged *Ominous Men* in October 2019. The

production was a co-presentation of MultiStages and the Theater at the 14th Street Y in downtown Manhattan, where *Ominous Men* premiered. *Ominous Men* is set in the Bronx in the summer of 1977 on the night of the citywide power outage in New York City, during which the Bronx (like some neighborhoods in Harlem and Brooklyn) had been decimated by fires. In the play a ragtag group of men—a recovering addict, Butch; Butch's relative Goyo; and an ex-Black Panther, Yancy—gather to play a game of dominoes inside the spooky basement of the Concourse Plaza, a once swanky building that has fallen into disrepair. The cyclical nature of Moreno-Penson's *Nuyorican Gothic* is reflected in her decision to again place the entire action of a play in a basement. The characters in *Ominous Men* discover they are not alone in the basement, as it is occupied by ghosts from the men's past and another supernatural presence.

Whereas *Comida de Puta* anticipated the current gentrification of the Bronx with the arrival of chain supermarkets like Whole Foods displacing Puerto Rican-owned local grocery stores, *Ominous Men* takes place in a time of white flight and disinvestment from the Bronx and the influx of Black and Latinx families.<sup>15</sup> The phrase "The Bronx is burning," coined in 1977, referred to the ubiquity of fires—some set by arsonists and insurance fraudsters, some caused by haphazard living conditions—that raged in the borough during this period. Carolyn McLaughlin writes about the myriad other issues that led to the urban decay of the Bronx in the 1970s: "There was a conflu-

ence of factors that caused the destruction—an upwardly mobile middle class moving out of the Bronx, increased numbers of low-income people moving in, accelerated middle-class flight caused by fear of crime and the opening of Co-op City, increased building operating costs, aging buildings, the dramatic devaluation of real estate, landlord disinvestment, severe government cuts to services, a near bankrupt city.”<sup>16</sup> Characters in *Ominous Men* reference the decline of the Bronx and details about the social, cultural, and economic landscape of New York City in 1977 that ground the play and the sensorial experience for audiences watching or reading it. It may seem like an odd choice for the setting of a Gothic tale, but the backdrop of a sweltering city in turmoil during a blackout, with looters breaking into stores and buildings, gives Moreno-Penson a dystopian and nightmarish landscape ripe for creative mining.

The following interview with Moreno-Penson was conducted via email in mid-December 2021 and has been edited for both length and clarity. I asked Moreno-Penson about the origins of her *Nuyorican Gothic* cycle, focusing on *Ominous Men* as a shift from the previous two works toward the themes of masculinity, misogyny in Latinx and Black culture, redemption, and the Bronx as a site of the Gothic. Moreno-Penson is a prolific mid-career playwright, and it is my hope that scholars and theater practitioners who discover her oeuvre here will be compelled to give the plays

## **THE BACKDROP OF A SWELTERING CITY IN TURMOIL DURING A BLACKOUT GIVES MORENO-PENSON A DYSTOPIAN AND NIGHTMARISH LANDSCAPE RIPE FOR CREATIVE MINING**





FIGURE 2. Renoly Santiago in *Ominous Men* (2016), written by Desi Moreno-Penson, directed by Lorca Peress, MultiStages co-presentation with the Theater at the 14th Street Y, New York, October 19–November 3, 2019. Photo courtesy of John Quilty.

in the *Nuyorican* cycle, as well as her published and unpublished works—including *Ghost Light*, *Beige*, *Three to a Session*, and others—the analysis and productions that they so richly deserve.

**A. J. Muhammad:** Desi, can you discuss the genesis of the *Nuyorican Gothic* cycle and the inspiration behind *Ominous Men*?

**Desi Moreno-Penson:** *Nuyorican Gothic* is a cycle of dark, stylized, and fantastical plays that are set in the Bronx, featuring Gothic themes, heightened, poetic language, and specifically “Nuyorican” characters.

The first play of the cycle, *Devil Land*, is an adult fairy tale of post-colonial angst, child abduction, and Taino mysticism set in the boiler room of a Bronx apartment building. With the second play, *Comida de Puta (F%&king Lousy Food)*, I sought inspiration from ancient Greek tragedy (Euripides’s *Hippolytus*) in order to tell a tale of unrequited lust, gentrification, and urban witchery in a run-down Bronx bodega. The third play, *Ominous Men*, tells the story of three men, one African American and two Latinos, who meet up on the night of July 13, 1977, in the subbasement of the derelict Concourse Plaza Hotel in the Bronx. They have come together for a night of drinking, some male camaraderie, and a game of dominoes. The eerie sound of falling pebbles on the steps, the ghostly sobs of a woman long dead, the angry apparition of a Jewish Holocaust survivor, and the appearance of an enigmatic, sinister stranger are among the highlights of their supernatural night of the soul. Then of course, there’s the blackout!

*Nuyorican Gothic* began at the time that I was writing *Devil Land*. I wished to pursue a theme that has always captured my attention: the effects of post-colonialism on second- and third-generation Latinx, specifically, Puerto Ricans in New York City. Having the chance to create a play cycle like *Nuyorican Gothic* made sense to me because I have always had a great love and affinity for Gothic literature, the tales of Edgar Allan Poe, and the history of the Grand Guignol, the legendary theater in Paris famous for its psychological horror tales featuring plenty of blood, gore, and ghoulish creatures. I have



FIGURE 3. Cast of *Ominous Men* (2016), written by Desi Moreno-Penson, directed by Lorca Peress, MultiStages co-presentation with the Theater at the 14th Street Y, New York, October 19–November 3, 2019. Photo courtesy of John Quilty.

always considered myself an outsider; my compassion and empathy for the “lone wolf” individual drive most of my narratives, and it was this that inspired my writing *Ominous Men*. I like scary stories, stories about ghosts, about the possibility of a world beyond this world.

**AJM:** Besides some of the most apparent representations—the ghost of Mordecai, who was killed by Butch and returns to haunt him, and the shape-shifting character Mundoo—how do you deploy the Gothic in *Ominous Men*?

**DMP:** A key plot point in *Ominous Men* is the men’s search for a supposed buried treasure in the sub-basement. For these BIPOC men, who are on the periphery of society, the search for a secret treasure becomes their distorted version of the American dream. Because of the racially charged, sociopolitical circumstances surrounding them, this is what they’re left with: becoming greedy scavengers digging in the dark for a hidden bounty—a bounty that may never be found.

Placing my characters in tight, dark, subterranean spaces also helps to produce a “gothic” tone and



FIGURE 4. Johnny Rivera, Gus Scharr, and Russell Jordan in *Ominous Men* (2016), written by Desi Moreno-Penson, directed by Lorca Peress, MultiStages co-presentation with the Theater at the 14th Street Y, New York, October 19–November 3, 2019. Photo courtesy of John Quilty.

feel. It gives the work an immediacy that demands some attention from an audience. The sense that you dare not turn away for fear that you might miss a word, a phrase, aggressive behaviors, sounds, a connection between the dead and the living, the spirit world, and so many other details. In addition, the tightness of the space becomes a Kafkaesque cage that the main characters are unable to escape from. With this play, I was stirred by ancient Gothic tropes

of amoral men desperately trying to beat the devil by playing games of chance.

**AJM:** *Ominous Men* is the only play in *Nuyorican Gothic* that occurs on a specific day—June 13, 1977, the night of the blackout in New York City when the power went out across the entire city.

**DMP:** From the very beginning, I knew that the night of the 1977 blackout would be an important character in



FIGURE 5. Howard Pinhasik and Johnny Rivera in *Ominous Men* (2016), written by Desi Moreno-Penson, directed by Lorca Peres, MultiStages co-presentation with the Theater at the 14th Street Y, New York, October 19–November 3, 2019. Photo courtesy of John Quilty.

the play. As a proud Bronxite, I first began formulating ideas for *Ominous Men* by immersing myself into the history of the Grand Concourse in the Bronx, a once affluent area celebrated as the Jewish Promised Land in the 1950s. I explored the history of the Concourse Plaza, as well as the urban blight that ravaged the same area from the late 1960s through the early '80s. This was the period known as the Burning Times.<sup>17</sup> The play takes us to a time when President Gerald Ford told the city and its inhabitants to drop dead.<sup>18</sup>

The city was in economic collapse, racial tensions were high, soul and disco boosted through boom-boxes/ghetto blasters, and it was a vibrant, hot, and fearsome world. In many ways, this epoch of such dangerous unrest and socioeconomic inequality culminated and climaxed on the night of the 1977 black-out. Not to mention the ever-menacing presence of the Son of Sam serial killer, David Berkowitz. You could hear the shouts and cries in the dark streets and the smell of burning ash in the air. That to me is

## THE USE OF GOTHIC LANGUAGE MUST ALWAYS MAINTAIN AND SUPPORT THE PERVASIVE SENSE OF DREAD AND FEAR THAT PERMEATES AND DRIVES THE STORY

pure gothic. As such, there was no way that I would write this play without including the inherent drama of this momentous and historical night!

**AJM:** Language plays an integral role in the *Nuyorican Gothic* cycle. How did you devise the language spoken by the supernatural characters Mordecai and Mundoo?

**DMP:** I believe language is probably my favorite aspect from *Nuyorican Gothic*. “Gothic” language is usually very florid and poetic and anachronistic, but most important, the use of this language must always maintain and support the pervasive sense of dread and fear that permeates and drives the story. To give an example, here’s a short exchange between Yancy and Mundoo from *Ominous Men* where Mundoo gives a unique, intense, and rather high-handed answer to Yancy’s simple question, “Who are you?”

Mundoo: Me? I’m a bow-bendin’ berserker, man  
A hatchet-packin’, feather-headed, cherry nigger,  
my brother, YA DIG?

A heckified *heyoka*, ravenous taster of raiding  
men’s blood—Men must beware other men.

(Mocking, backwards sign of the cross) *Et cavendum est hominibus!*

I’m the dastard pet-hate of sand spout and storms.

The hellish rove-beetle of sebaceous grass and  
pestilent swarms

Ah, forget the fuckin’ snake, man

I am the Wind’s Meander! The Mesmer of the  
Wood

Mannitol of the Mountains . . . the Manito of the  
Hills!

Okay, scratch the *mountains* part.

It’d sound better if it were “Manito of the Mountains,” wouldn’t it?

But there are no mountains in the Bronx . . .  
only little bumps on the ground and fish with tiny  
gills . . . !

Yancy: (shocked) W-what are you talking about? What’s  
a “Manito”?

Mundoo: Mundoo. . . Manito. . . Siwanoy names are  
one. They all mean “great spirit.” But when the white  
missionaries came, they changed it to mean something  
else.

Yancy: What?

Mundoo: “Demon.”





FIGURE 6. Russell Jordan and Gabrielle Lee in *Ominous Men* (2016), written by Desi Moreno-Penson, directed by Lorca Peress, MultiStages co-presentation with the Theater at the 14th Street Y, New York, October 19–November 3, 2019. Photo courtesy of John Quilty.

**AJM:** With the exception of the apparition of a non-speaking woman, *Ominous Men* centers on an all-male cast of characters and themes like machismo, sexuality, and Latinx masculinity that you have not examined as fully in your other plays.

**DMP:** Although there are no female characters in *Ominous Men* (with the exception of a one-time supernatural appearance in the second act you just

mentioned), their lack of presence is keenly and viscerally felt by the men who've had deeply disturbing and dysfunctional relationships with women all their lives. The haunting, spectral presence of "The Woman" represents the women that they have loved but harmed. She speaks no words because the men have denied her a voice. It is difficult to see her face, because the men are ashamed to look upon her beauty. It is easier for them to destroy her rather than meet her honestly, face-to-face. Through the lack of



FIGURE 7. Russell Jordan and Gabrielle Lee in *Ominous Men* (2016), written by Desi Moreno-Penson, directed by Lorca Peress, MultiStages co-presentation with the Theater at the 14th Street Y, New York, October 19–November 3, 2019. Photo courtesy of John Quilty.

female characters in *Ominous Men*, I was interested in focusing on Latina writers who continue to remain stagnant and, ultimately, unseen in the theater.

**AJM:** I'm interested in how masculinity and gender are performed and destabilized in the play. Is there a cost for Butch and Goyo performing their sociocultural roles?

**DMP:** For me, this question speaks to the inherent tragedy of the play itself. I feel that *Ominous Men* is a tragedy in the classic sense, with the spine of a

Gothic horror tale. These men are desperate for redemption and frantic to restore themselves spiritually. These are not “godly” men, or as Goyo says in the play, they’re not “the godtalkers.” They are not heroes, and they know it. They are very much aware of their avarice and dark impulses. The play explores what they choose to do about it. My hope is that, in spite of their obvious shortcomings, an audience will want to root for this small band of antiheroes.

Concerning Butch and Goyo, and with the Latinx community especially, the toxic, old-fashioned tenets of machismo and misogyny remain alive and well.

Both Butch and Yancy have done their women horrible wrongs. Goyo struggles with his overall dislike of women, issues with his sexuality, and the possibility that he might be homosexual. Every time a woman's sobs are heard in the play, the men on stage seem on the verge of crumbling in agony. The effect is palpable, a profound consequence of their actions. The sad irony is that they truly love their women deeply. Nevertheless, their anger, pride, and psychological trauma due to the circumstances in their lives prevents them from overcoming their terrible behaviors.

**AJM:** *Ominous Men* is the first play in the cycle that includes an African American character, and in this case it's Yancy, the former Black Panther turned drug counselor. How did the idea to include the perspective of an African American character emerge?

**DMP:** There is one thing I would hope that someone would take from either reading the play or seeing a performance of *Ominous Men*, and that is inclusion. The blackout of 1977 affected everyone in the city. The burgeoning days of the disco era in New York City were a heady, intoxicating music and lifestyle created by African American, Latinx, and LGBTQ artists, all of them coming together in the discotheques. During my research, I came upon a reference to an article written in 1975 where a representative spokesperson of the Black Panthers called disco a "liberated territory."<sup>19</sup> This reference was one of the origins for my looking into creating the character of Yancy.

## THEY ARE VERY MUCH AWARE OF THEIR AVARICE AND DARK IMPULSES. THE PLAY EXPLORES WHAT THEY CHOOSE TO DO ABOUT IT

**AJM:** The characters have gathered to play a game of dominoes, or "bones." The double meaning of "bones" and "boneyard"—the latter refers to the dominoes that haven't been selected by the players—describes the game and the basement setting of the play where death is omnipresent. Tell us about why you chose to make the characters play dominoes and use this game to drive the play's action?

**DMP:** My immediate thought for writing *Ominous Men* was to borrow from ancient, Gothic tropes of amoral men trying to outwit the devil by playing games of chance. I wanted to find a game that would be culturally more specific to the Latinx and BIPOC community as a whole. What is interesting is that, although dominoes is discussed at length by most of the characters throughout, the game is not actually played until the very end. This is when Muddoo, through all his paranormal finagling, has finally won Butch's soul, and he, Butch, and Mordecai play





FIGURE 8. Renoly Santiago in *Ominous Men* (2016), written by Desi Moreno-Penson, directed by Lorca Peress, MultiStages co-presentation with the Theater at the 14th Street Y, New York, October 19–November 3, 2019. Photo courtesy of John Quilty.

a doomed, hopeless game of “bones” for the rest of eternity. I credit my director, Lorca Peress, for suggesting that the game of dominoes represents something of a finite marker, a symbolic, spiritual choice that, once made, can never be undone. I personally loved the gothic ramifications of this since it made me think of the finite nature of death.

**AJM:** The Concourse Plaza has a history that parallels the decline of the Bronx during that era due

to the infamous cases of arson that decimated the South Bronx. It is both the setting of *Ominous Men* and, as it is a site that is haunted by the ghosts, it is a character.

**DMP:** This notion of inanimate objects holding magical or supernatural power is a prevalent theme in *Nuyorican Gothic*. The Concourse Plaza was the only building in the Bronx that has this kind of built-in, mythic, legendary status. I felt it was the ideal setting

for an old-fashioned kind of Gothic horror story, exploring questions of racial and societal victimization and abuse by and on Latinx, African American, Indigenous, and Jewish people. I wished to create a feeling of the building itself hovering over the men. It's only in this state of [the hotel's] deterioration that the men finally have "permission" to congregate within, and they resent it. Especially in the case of Goyo, they experience internalized shame because of it. It's acknowledged by the characters that the building has secrets of its own. Secrets that the men, as non-whites, will never be privileged to hear, and they know it.

**AJM:** There's a paradox of how you depict the Bronx in your work as a community and a place of terror, horror, and tragedy, particularly for its Black and Brown inhabitants. How does this contradiction inform your work?

**DMP:** I embrace the paradox, not because it's easy but because I wish to grow as an artist. Therefore life has to be both bad and good, depending on your perspective, and both states of being must be extreme and passionate. The Bronx is considered ugly and problematic by so many, and yet there's such beauty and splendor here, too. How do you explain that? Well, you don't; you live it. For me this is what it means to be BIPOC; you don't have the luxury to live your life in a bubble, nor do you get to feel entitled to anything, but if you're lucky, you just might get the chance to live a fully immersive life.

## THE BRONX IS CONSIDERED UGLY AND PROBLEMATIC BY SO MANY, AND YET THERE'S SUCH BEAUTY AND SPLENDOR HERE

**AJM:** Before concluding, you've discussed a fourth play in the *Nuyorican Gothic* cycle. Where are you in the development process? What can you share about this project?

**DMP:** In my fourth and final installment in the cycle, which I have tentatively titled "The Gift Shop of Touch and Roses," I want to go all the way back in Bronx history, to the year 1918. Back to a time when the borough was, for the most part, rural, with little if no industrialization, and with mostly German, Jewish, and Irish inhabitants. That said, the Latinx and the Afro-Americans were there too.

However, during the COVID-19 crisis I also began to change my own ideas about how food could be used as a mystical, supernatural conduit and how the social act of going to a restaurant would be transformed, most likely forever. So I am now currently writing/developing a two-play cycle called the *Food and Pandemic* plays. The first one, *El Bacalao* (*The*

*Catfish Man*), is a loose adaptation of *The Bacchae* by Euripides and takes place in a Cuban restaurant in Florida. The play was recently selected for the 2021 Fall Writing Intensive with Workshop Theater. The second play, *Sin Agua (Without Water)*, takes place in a restaurant in Mexico City and is currently part of the 2022–23 Fighting Words New Script Development Program with Babes with Blades Theater Company in Chicago. And as I have been recently invited to join the playwrights'/directors' unit (PDU) at the Actors Studio, I am now also preparing for a new staged reading of my play *Beige*, which won the National Latinx Playwriting Award in 2016. Therefore I think it's going to be a while before I'm finally able to get back home to *Nuyorican Gothic*, but I certainly hope to do so again, as it is a project very close to my heart. ■

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### Notes

- 1 Pruitt-Young, "Black Women Vanish Each Year"; Pearce, "'Missing White Woman Syndrome.'"
- 2 Wester, "Gothic and the Politics of Race," 167.
- 3 Wester, "Black Diasporic Gothic," 290.
- 4 Wester, "Black Diasporic Gothic," 292.
- 5 Wester, "Black Diasporic Gothic," 293.
- 6 Jiménez-Román, "Indians Are Coming!," 76.
- 7 See Rivera, *New York Ricans from the Hip Hop Zone*; Fernández, *Young Lords*; Jiménez Román and Flores, *Afro-Latin@ Reader*; Jiménez Román, "Indians Are Coming!" See also Lee, *Building a Latino Civil Rights Movement*.
- 8 Rivera, *New York Ricans*, 26.
- 9 Jiménez Román, "Indians Are Coming!," 89.
- 10 Jiménez Román, "Indians Are Coming!," 89.
- 11 Herrera, *Nuyorican Feminist Performance*, 29.
- 12 Herrera, *Nuyorican Feminist Performance*, 29.
- 13 Algarin and Holman, *Aloud*, 5.
- 14 Herrera, *Nuyorican Feminist Performance*, 34.

15 Gould, "'Bronx Is Burning.'"

16 McLaughlin, *South Bronx Battles*, 74.

17 Thanks to the *liquid blackness* editors who pointed out the phrase "Burning Times" is better known as a description of another gothic event, the Salem witch trials.

18 Roberts, "Infamous 'Drop Dead' Was Never Said by Ford," states Gerald R. Ford never explicitly said "drop dead" in the 1975 speech in which he denied federal funding to New York City; yet those words were encapsulated on the front page of the October 30, 1975, issue of the *New York Daily News*.

19 Williams and Lazerow, *Liberated Territory*.

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