

Shattered Hopes and Dreams:

The Timeless Realities of Immigration and City Life in David Riker's *La Ciudad*

**Abstract.** David Riker's moving film, *La Ciudad*, reveals numerous problems faced by the Latin American immigrant community living in the many cities across the United States. These brave souls that journey leave their homelands with hopes of fulfilling the American Dream often discover just how unforgiving life really is in 'the city'. In this paper, I will analyze all four of the stories that comprise Riker's episodic film, revealing how he, through both storytelling and cinematography, highlights the exploitation of immigrant workers in the city and the other issues that they face, such as a lack of education. In doing so, Riker also reflects upon the same problems that plagued other immigrant groups over the course of the history of the United States, and he creates a film that reveals the need for social reform.

BY

DAVID MONGOR-LIZARRABENGOA

Department of Latin American & Latino Studies

Montclair State University

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## ***Introduction***

For decades, immigrants from all over the world have come to the United States with one goal in mind: to fulfill the American Dream. Thousands upon thousands of them each year seek economic opportunities in the hundreds of cities across America. Many times, these brave immigrants will make the trip across the border alone, leaving their families behind in their native country. In turn, these immigrants are expected to send money back home to help support their families. Unfortunately for these courageous souls, the American Dream is usually shattered by the reality of life in the city.

David Riker's movie, *La Ciudad*, filmed between 1992 and 1997, presents four different stories of Latin American immigrants that have come to New York City, in the hopes of fulfilling their dreams, but instead they find a cold and unforgiving place. These emotional tales reveal the real life struggles and exploitation of the Latin American community living in the major cities all over the United States. Even though the film was released in 1998, its message is truly timeless as it not only reveals the issues that the Latino community faces today in 2011, but it also presents the struggle that immigrants have faced for decades in the United States as well as the pain of the indigenous people still living in Latin America. This study will analyze each of the four individual stories and the film as a whole, focusing on how Riker presents the lives of the Latin American immigrant workers through storytelling and aesthetic choices –*mise-en-scène*, acting, camerawork, cinematography –; in doing so he breaks the traditional and inviting image of the city. In addition, I will reference other Latin American and Latino literary works and films to demonstrate how Riker's movie is not only a representation of the hardships of the

immigrant Latino community in the United States but also of the immigrant workers that came before them.

As the title of the film indicates, the director does not refer to one specific city in the United States, even though the famous landmarks and skyscrapers clearly indicate it is New York City. Without a specific name, David Riker creates a universal city. Many authors from all over the world employ a similar technique in order to make their works and locations appear to be universal; sometimes their cities and villages have names other times they do not like the city in Riker's film. With or without a name, Riker's city could be any city in the entire world as he focuses on a universal theme: the exploitation of the worker. Literally, the struggles faced by the immigrants in Riker's film could occur in any city on the planet in which immigrants go to in hopes of fulfilling their dreams. The title of the movie also plays a secondary role, "[t]he title advances the idea that the city has the primary role in the cast of characters. However, in the film, we see the city as co-protagonist rather than a main character" (Medina 15). Even though the movie was filmed in the 1990s, Riker chose to shoot it in black and white. There are numerous reasons as to why the director opted not to film in color. By presenting the city using only black, white, and gray colors, Riker is able to better conceal the identity of his city because using the whole spectrum of colors would make it easily distinguishable. In addition, the lack of color serves a secondary role because it does help to portray the city as a dark and ominous place where dreams are easily shattered. It would be rather difficult to portray the city in such a negative manner if the film was shot in color.

The opening scene of the movie is a rather gloomy long-range shot of the city; a metro train makes its way along its tracks. "The camera gazes from the lower income area as the train

seems to escape rapidly into the shelter of the other New York, into the more affluent areas” (Medina 15). Throughout the entire film, the director employs a variation of this shot. In the foreground, the audience is constantly exposed to a poverty stricken area, whether it be a wall covered with graffiti, a wall in such disrepair that it is about to fall over, or streets littered with trash. In the far distance, lie the massive skyscrapers and other major landmarks. This is the part of the city where one can fulfill the American Dream and find the streets paved with gold. In the second half of the Twentieth Century, more than half of Latin America’s rural community immigrated to a city within the region or abroad in search of better economic opportunities (Hillman 228-229). Numerous Latin American literary works and films from the 1950s through the present depict the city as a place of economic opportunity as Riker does, however; sometimes the immigrants are swallowed by the urban jungle, and other times they are not. For example, in one of his most famous films, *Retrato de Teresa*, Cuban director Pastor Vega includes a similar shot to the opening of Riker’s movie. During the opening credits of his film, the camera pans to the right, revealing Habana in the background. Much like the immigrants of *La Ciudad*, the city represents Teresa’s goals and dreams. Ultimately, she is able to get a job as a seamstress in Habana, which in turn gives her more freedom and independence. Unfortunately for the immigrants in Riker’s film, they do not share Teresa’s success; instead they find a soulless city and have their dreams shattered in the urban jungle where it is very difficult to find a job and even harder to find one where they’re not exploited.

### ***Bricks: The Need For Unity***

“Bricks” is the first of the four stories that make up *La Ciudad*. “[T]he *mis- en-scène* used to design the dominant settings for the first story emphasizes the idea of immediate urban

decay” (Medina 15). The first shot depicts a scene that has become a very common sight in many cities and towns across the United States, a group of immigrant workers are waiting on the street corner hoping that someone will stop and offer them a job for the day. “The appearance of Mexican immigrant street corner labor markets dated to the 1980s... Although the practice began in California, it spread to other American cities and towns” (Reimers 113). As the population of undocumented immigrants rose in the United States, more and more communities experienced a rise in street corner labor. Many businesses tried to exploit the workers, just like the Italian man does in “Bricks”. In the midst of this current economic recession, businesses and their owners have gone to great lengths to save as much money as possible by utilizing cheap labor; often times, this requires the muscle power of undocumented immigrants.

As the opening sequence of shots reveals, the immigrant workers are not waiting outside of the skyscrapers and landmarks of Manhattan. Instead, they stand on a dirty street, littered with trash and debris. The buildings behind them are covered with graffiti and some of the walls look as if they are about to crumble. While the men are waiting for someone to offer them work, they act peacefully amongst each other, but the scene quickly changes once a man arrives looking to hire a couple of men. The group of workers crowd around the van and push each other out of the way in order to improve their chances of being selected; this scene is pivotal because it “acquires Darwinian and naturalistic characteristics” (Medina 16). Keeping Darwin’s theories in mind, it becomes obvious that the youngest, fastest, and strongest workers will ultimately be chosen and will survive. In this case, the group of immigrants fight amongst themselves like animals. “The street becomes the background for these human beings and the

self sacrifice, regret and dehumanization that they suffer as they struggle within the parameters of the 'survival of the fittest'. Riker's New York appears as a jungle where people must survive" (Medina 16). As Medina explained, the city in Riker's film is a metaphor for the jungle. Countless Latin American writers, especially those of the telluric novel, reveal that man is always defeated by nature. In the case of *La Ciudad*, the poor and weaker immigrants always find themselves losing the battle against the urban jungle as they will have great difficulty finding work.

Another man appears on the street and begins to distribute fliers amongst the immigrant workers announcing a meeting to address the concerns of the police and shopkeepers, who want to prohibit them from waiting on the street for work. Towns across the country have tried to put an end to street corner hiring, however; most attempts to eliminate it were unsuccessful. In some cases, there have been heated and violent arguments between the town residents and Hispanic workers (Reimers 112-113). To no surprise, the immigrants become upset by the man's news that the police want them off of the streets. As another truck approaches, the immigrants lose interest in what the man has to say; they swarm the vehicle in hopes of getting chosen for work. Unity is a powerful weapon and quite possibly the only one for the immigrants if they choose to survive. Riker expands more on this theme towards the end of "Bricks".

An Italian man emerges from the truck and requests ten good men and promises to pay them fifty dollars. Once again, the men transform into a pack of animals, pushing and shoving their way to the front of the line, begging to be picked. Quickly, the men become too rowdy and the Italian closes the back door of his truck and proceeds to the work site after choosing the

best men from the group. As they arrive at the worksite, the immigrants become disheartened as the Italian man informs them they will be paid a mere fifteen cents for every brick that they clean instead of the fifty dollars that was promised. Not surprisingly, the men are very frustrated that they had been double-crossed. All of them decide to take the work anyway because they have no other choice. In order to survive another day, they must work for themselves and for their families back home. Who knows when they will be offered another job? A study by the New School University revealed that many of the Hispanic day laborers in New York City had families in their native countries and sent them \$3,600 annually (Reimers 113). Hence, even if paid a measly fifteen cents per brick, all of the men are better off than if they were back home, where there are few jobs and economic opportunities, or if they declined any job offer. Ultimately, they need to work in order to survive, no matter what the price.

Again, the skyscrapers of the city are seen in the far distance as the workers clean the bricks from a building demolition site. Shortly thereafter, they begin to quarrel with each other again, like animals, accusing one of them of stealing bricks from another's stack. Darwin's survival of the fittest theory is present once again as the man with the most bricks gets paid the most and therefore, has the best chance of survival. Finally, one of the walls collapses, crushing one of the immigrants. This accident actually unites the men as they try to save their comrade's life, but, unfortunately, their efforts prove unsuccessful since they cannot summon medical assistance because they do not know their exact location. "Near the camera the audience sees debris, destruction, and death. The camera, using medium-range shots, exposes the hopelessness of the workers. A man has dies in the jungle of the city and nothing could stop it" (Medina 16). While standing over the dead man's body, one of the workers explains to the rest

that they need to work together in order to survive. In his collection of poetry, *Canto general*, Pablo Neruda proposes that the indigenous peoples of Latin America, like the immigrants in Riker's film, have been betrayed, thus resulting in the need for unity and camaraderie. Neruda firmly believes that this is the only way for Latin Americans to gain freedom and escape from the tyrannical rule of the Western World. His solution is for the native Latin Americans to unite under communism to create governments based on human need and societies without social classes. If any group of immigrants were to unite in any city on the globe, not necessarily with the hopes of forming a communist society, they would have a better chance at surviving in the urban jungle. Strength is in numbers, and it would be much more difficult to exploit a larger group of unified Latinos than individuals, like the Italian man in "Bricks". Riker even suggests the men meet earlier in the segment to prevent being kicked off the street; such a meeting would present an opportunity to discuss other issues so that no one else is killed on a job, however; the men refuse to listen. Until the immigrants unite, they are doomed as they try to "make it" in the unforgiving city.

### ***Home: The City as an Urban Jungle***

Of the four stories that comprise the film, the second one, "Home" is the only one that does not primarily focus on the hardships faced by the Latino workers. A young man, Francisco, has come to the city to live with his uncle, but he gets lost while trying to locate the apartment. By chance he stumbles in on a party, where he meets Maria, a girl that comes from the same Mexican village. "Two people live close to each other for years in a small town find each other in a huge cosmopolitan space that ordinary devours its inhabitants. The irony that makes their encounter also permeates the story's plot" (Medina 18).



At the party they have a great time dancing and enter a private space outside of the building. Francisco reminisces that he is back in Mexico because he feels that the music, dancing, and people create an atmosphere much like that of his hometown. This is a unique presentation of the city because for this brief moment, it is not the urban jungle depicted in the rest of the film; rather it's a place of nostalgia. After enjoying the festivities, Francisco goes home with Maria, where they begin to talk about their futures. He explains that he hopes to find a nice job, save money, and buy a home. Since he has just arrived in the city, Francisco is still full of hopes and dreams that will be crushed in time. Maria, on the other hand, has lived in the city for several years and does not share Francisco's optimism. She has not seen her family for more than four years, who depend on her financial support; she admits that she feels trapped in the urban jungle, like so many other immigrants.

In the morning, Francisco leaves Maria's apartment to purchase some food for breakfast but is unable to find his way back. As he attempts to retrace his steps, he finds himself completely lost in a maze of apartment buildings. Riker uses the camera to show the immense size of the buildings; an extremely long-range, high angle shot from above shows that Francisco is nothing more than a small man lost in an immense urban jungle. "The tall buildings become a thick wall within this jungle of cement that separates Maria and Francisco... The city literally swallows its dwellers. The romantic hero fails and must admit defeat in arms of a force superior and stronger to him, the city" (Medina 19). In this case, Riker again seems to draw a parallel between the city and Latin America's jungles. At the end of *La vorágine*, by José Eustasio Rivera, Arturo Cova leads his companions into the jungle in hopes of returning to the city. His friend Clemente Silva searches for them for five months before proclaiming, "The jungle has

swallowed them” (371). Cova, his group, and Francisco are all defeated by a cruel and unforgiving jungle that swallows them along with any hopes or dreams.

### ***The Puppeteer: Problems with Education***

The third story in the film, “The Puppeteer” is the only story that directly deals with problems education facing the Latino community. The section begins with several shots of a puppet show taking place in an abandoned lot with overgrown weeds and trash. Behind the puppeteer’s booth, stands a building that is crumbling, ready to fall apart. Again, Riker places scenes of urban decay right in front of the camera. Later that evening, Luis, the puppeteer, reads to his daughter, Dulce, in his car; she is illiterate and not enrolled in public school. The next series of shots reveal Luis gathering scraps of wood to make a fire; his coughing indicates that he is ill. The problem is that he is simply too poor to go see a doctor to get the medical treatment he so desperately needs. Once again, depicts the skyscrapers of the city in the distance. In the foreground, the audience sees Luis’s old station wagon parked in a dirty park next to the river, another sign of poverty.

When Luis attempts to enroll his daughter in school, she is denied admission because they are homeless. Luis is asked to provide some sort of documentation that proves he lives in the city, such as a bill with his address. He becomes very frustrated and explains that his daughter has the right to go to school and have an education. This segment of Riker’s film alludes an ongoing problem with education as a whole in the Latino community. Recently published data from the U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey reveals that 21.6% of Hispanics do not complete ninth grade, compared to 2.7% of whites. Of the Hispanics that do make it into high school, 16.1% dropout prior to graduation, compared to 5.8% of whites. Since

the school district's rules and regulations do not permit homeless children to attend school in Riker's film, they only contribute to this national problem. Without an education, Dulce is doomed to be a puppeteer like her father since many doors will be closed to her.

Much like the other three stories of the film, "The Puppeteer" reveals how hard it is for Latinos to achieve the American Dream. If a person does not have the proper documentation in the United States, they are excluded from certain privileges such as driving, working on the books, and in Luis and Dulce's case, an education. Lacking any necessary documents is almost like not having an identity. Simply because the father and daughter do not have a permanent address, they will forever remain puppeteers making others laugh, even though there is nothing funny about the reality of their situation. Luis's dream of providing his daughter with a good education is undoubtedly shattered. In a way, their problem is one that is quite common amongst Hispanics in the United States since, according to a recent report by the Pew Hispanic Center, there are approximately 11.1 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States. Quite obviously, all of these people will at some point face the same problem as Luis and Dulce; they will be asked to present documentation that they do not have. As a result, they will have very limited employment and educational opportunities; thus it will be nearly impossible for them to find a steady and stable job in which they will be able to live comfortably and save money. In this case, Riker has re-envisioned the American Dream. From this new perspective only the immigrants that come to the United States legally, with proper documentation, are able to pursue the dream. Even though the traditional ideology of the American Dream is that anyone would be able to strike it big through hard work in the United

States, Riker shows through Luis and Dulce that undocumented immigrants do not stand a chance.

***Seamstress: United We Stand***

The final segment of *La Ciudad*, “Seamstress,” turns the city into a sort of prison in which there is little hope for success or change. Riker touches on this in “Home” when Maria tells Francisco that she feels trapped living there. The seamstress, Ana, like Maria, has to work to support both herself and her family back home. By utilizing effective shots and the actions of the story, Riker is able to depict the sewing factory as a sort of jail and sweatshop. All of the workers are crowded in the factory, and the Korean bosses are very demanding, an atmosphere reminiscent of that of a prison with a strict warden and guards. If one of the employees is not working fast enough, they will be sent home. To make matters worse, the bosses have not paid any of the workers for over four weeks. In an interview, David Riker explains how he got the inspiration for this story. After distributing leaflets about the production of the film, he was approached one day by an Ecuadorian woman who said, “I’ve only been here for six months and I don’t know what this means, but I was given this leaflet yesterday, and this is my life. I haven’t been paid for the past five weeks and the Korean boss hits me all the time.” At the beginning of the story, Ana is happy and actually smiles; she has high hopes of achieving the American Dream, but she soon realizes that she is indeed a prisoner and trapped when she needs to send her mother, in Mexico, four hundred dollars to pay for her young daughter’s medical treatment. The owners of the sweatshop refuse to help her, claiming that maybe she will get paid the following week.

Riker's use of the camera also helps to create the atmosphere of a sweatshop and prison. In the beginning of the story, the director uses mostly medium shots when portraying Ana, but after she requests to be paid, the "shots switch to long and the angles to high to help portray her imprisoned condition. The high angles show her inferior position in relation to the sweatshop owner and her brother" (Medina 19). Towards the end of the story, the camera also picks up the hot steam coming off of the irons and the sweat dripping off the workers' faces. This sweltering and insufferable place is nothing more than a prison that has entrapped Ana in the city.

Riker's effective use of the camera and story paint a grim picture of a sweatshop and the exploitation of the workers, however; it is not always necessary to paint such a grim picture to get the same message across. For example, in Patricia Cardoso's film, *Real Women Have Curves*, there is a very different image of a sewing factory. Ana takes up a summer job at her sister Estela's dress factory and tells her that it is nothing more than a sweatshop. For every dress they make, Bloomingdale's pays them a mere eighteen dollars, while they sell them in their stores for six hundred dollars each. Clearly, this is another example of the exploitation of workers because the bosses take all of the profits and pay the workers a fraction of what they should be to the point where Estela's factory is on the verge of bankruptcy. The same thing is going on in Riker's film as the Korean bosses take all of the profit and refuse to pay their employees. Cardoso, however, portrays the sewing factory as a wide open space, unlike that of Riker's film, and the atmosphere is much more festive as the workers are very good friends and have fun at their job. Undoubtedly, Cardoso's film is meant to be inspirational therefore; she does not use the same intensity as Riker does when depicting the exploitation of the workers.

In both films, teamwork ultimately saves the day. All of the women in Estela's factory work together to complete a large dress order on time thus, the business is saved and ultimately Estela finds a new distributor. At the end of Riker's film, Ana refuses to work because she is too upset over her daughter's illness and the fact that she is not being paid. As the sweatshop owner's brother yells at her, demanding that she go home, all of the other employees stop their work and stare harshly at the owners. This is the only one of the four stories of the film that ends on a slight message of hope. Ana's co-workers unite with her against the owners because she has finally stood up to their oppression and exploitation. Again, Riker's use of the camera is a key component in portraying her triumph. "The lower and middle angles used to show Ana place her in a position superior to the camera and therefore to the world whom she has conquered. The final shot delivers the subversive message that Ana will be alright in the midst of so much urban turmoil" (Medina 20). Because the workers in "Bricks" were unable to work together, they were unsuccessful in their battle against exploitation; whereas Ana and her co-workers united against their bosses, giving them some hope. Maybe Neruda's message in *Canto general* that the peoples of Latin America must unite against oppression is really the only chance for survival, after all, it is the only one Riker presents in *La Ciudad*.

### **Conclusion**

Over the course of the film, Riker presents the harsh realities that immigrants face in cities all over the world. Without a doubt, the United States is a nation that was built by immigrants. Thousands arrived specifically in New York City via Ellis Island; these hard-working men and women played a vital role in our history as they were responsible for building several

major landmarks and structures including the Transcontinental Railroad, the Brooklyn Bridge, and the Empire State Building. All of these immigrants came for one reason, to pursue the American Dream. Unfortunately, the United States was not a place where the streets were paved with gold. Many believed that moving to a city in America would improve their own lives as well as those of their families back home, but they soon found their hopes and dreams shattered by the reality of life in the city. Immigrants were usually underpaid, worked under dangerous and deplorable conditions, competed for jobs, had difficulty finding adequate living conditions, etc. On top of all that, they were even targeted by political organizations such as the Know-Nothing Party. The Latin Americans and Latinos in *La Ciudad* experience the same exploitation and discrimination as the immigrants that came before them; hence the movie becomes timeless. Future generations of immigrants will arrive in New York City as well as urban areas all over the world in pursuit of a better life, but they will find that the urban jungle is rather unforgiving. “Riker uses the movie to deface the mythical value assigned to New York by the several millions of foreigners that built it... [He] presents a city in complete decay... The camera constantly focuses on the harsh life of the current immigrants with an old city falling to pieces behind them” (Medina 20). The city is clearly not a place where dreams of a better life will be fulfilled.

In order to convey his message, Riker effectively uses the camera to present the great inequality and disparity between the impoverished areas of New York City that consistently remain in the foreground of the frame, directly in front of the audience, with the immense and wealthy skyscrapers of Manhattan that remain in the distant background, well out of reach of the immigrants that become the focus of the movie. By using a variety of shot sizes, ranging

from extremely long shots to close-ups, Riker reveals that these two worlds are so close to one another, yet at the same time, are so far apart. His movie camera is like a gun in the sense that both are instruments used to prompt changes. "The metaphor of the movie camera as a gun is as old as the apparatus itself" (Burton 49). By presenting the harsh realities of the lives of the Latino community living in the city, Riker, without a doubt, intended his film to open the eyes of those who are ignorant or who just ignore the manner in which immigrants survive in the cities across the United States. If others were to see the need for change like Riker, it is possible that the standard of living and quality of life would improve for immigrants all over the world. Thus, the city would no longer be a place where dreams are shattered; instead it would become a place where immigrants could create much better lives for themselves and their families.



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