

OUTLAW

THE COLLECTED WORKS OF
MIGUEL PIÑERO



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ALSO BY MIGUEL PIÑERO

La Bodega Sold Dreams

Outrageous One-Act Plays

The Sun Always Shines for the Cool

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MIGUEL PIÑERO



Introduction by Nicolás Kanellos
and Jorge Iglesias



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INTRODUCTION TO THE POETRY OF MIGUEL PIÑERO

BY NICOLÁS KANELLOS

University of Houston

It's three-thirty in the morning and the phone rings. It's Mikey calling from LA. He wants to dictate a poem to me. For the record? The archive? A future publication? "Okay, Mikey, go ahead," I grumble sleepily into the phone, and dutifully jot down the poem as his rasping voice dramatizes each line. Looking back, these early-morning requests were not unreasonable, given the circumstances under which Miguel Piñero lived and developed his art. Quite often without a place to "crash," no office or file cabinet other than his frantically scribbled notebooks, which he often lost when he did crash in a shooting gallery or alone on the floor of a bookstore back room or in his blurred travels from his haunts on the Lower East Side to Hollywood or a filming location—there is no telling how much of Piñero's poems and plays-in-progress were lost to posterity. There is also no retrieving the portions of dialog he drafted for such T.V. crime dramas as "Baretta," "Kojak" and "Miami Vice," whose remuneration helped to keep him high and doubtlessly cut into his poetic and dramatic creativity, eroding his legacy not only by distracting him from his ultimate and favored literary mission but also from polishing, preserving and publishing his works. He confessed as much in "Antarctica": "Each penny accumulated/to feed my veins . . . /distort the rhythm in my living. . . ." (68). Despite the lucrative Hollywood paydays and his national fame as a playwright on the leading edge, Piñero was perennially destitute, often ill and frequently involved in scrapes with the police—that is, after having served years of hard time.

An expert and celebrant of the narcotics and sex trades in New York City, the self-educated ex-con/writer Piñero (“a thief, a junky I’ve been/committed every known sin” in “A Lower East Side Poem”⁴) stood his marginalized ground to unmask the hypocrisy of mainstream society, to attack the bases of latter-day capitalism and American imperialism, especially for having produced the transplant and ghetto entrapment of Puerto Ricans. Unlike the more subtle critiques in his plays, Piñero’s poems were composed and performed for his people, his neighborhood, often to educate and connect the dots from capitalism to racism and labor exploitation:

capitalism
who begat racism
who begat exploitation
who begat machismo
who begat imperialism
who begat colonialism
who begat wall street
who begat foreign wars (“The Book of Genesis According to St. Miguelito”⁶)

For the irreverent Piñero, God created all that is ugly in the world, God is the Greatest Capitalist of them all and the arch Hypocrite. In the central metaphor of his book, the United States is the grand *bodega* where everything is for sale, and God is the Bodeguero who oversees and empowers all the salesmen—corporate leaders and politicians—who ultimately sell and manipulate the merchandise for sale in Piñero’s community: drugs and flesh. Unable to fit in and labeled a criminal in this societal order, Piñero in his life and art lashed back as an outlaw:

a street-fighting man
a problem of this land
I am the Philosopher of the Criminal Mind
a dweller of prison time
a cancer of Rockefeller’s ghettocide (“A Lower East Side Poem”⁵)

It is from this stance that he embarks on attacking and protesting injustice, racial and economic oppression and hypocrisy; as an outlaw poet situated outside of societal norms he is able to reveal all of the

ugliness created by the capitalist order and embrace all of the victims that society has rejected and derided.

Firmly cognizant of his and his community's existence in the space where two cultures and social classes meet, Piñero used that interstitial space to create new language, new life, new art. Not an unsophisticated folk artist but a technologically connected and savvy observer of daily life and willing consumer of popular culture, he never considered the canon, which he intuited was created and sustained to solidify the identity and power of the oppressors. Instead, he found common ground with the cultural expressions of all of the marginalized peoples in his world: spoken blues, early rock and roll, salsa and, most of all, *declamación*, that art of performing one's poetry in the community, in his case inflected with the accents of African American prison poetry, the beat generation and Nuyorican bilingual dialect. Like fellow Nuyorican poets Victor Hernández Cruz and Tato Laviera, he strove to capture the rhythm, tone and excitement of salsa in many of his verses:

all the worlds were twirlin' wild
as if the universe had gone mad . . .

Eddie Palmieri went insane in the milky way
driving the zodiac into a frenzy
an orgy of latin sounds ("A Latin Trip" 49)

But Piñero most loved the talking blues. Only the blues seemed to capture his melancholy and regret for leading the life he did; in his "New York City Hard Time Blues" and other compositions, he sang of the "hard times" of being hooked, of never being able to experience true love, of loneliness and alienation. . . . The rhythm and repetition of his blues refrains also informed his eulogy for a person who foolishly pursued the American Dream in "Seeking the Cause." You may still be able to find a commercially produced 33 rpm recording of Mikey's own performed rendition of his bluesy masterpiece, "New York City Hard Time Blues," and perhaps some other arcane recordings of other readings, but his spoken compositions transcribed in the poems published in this volume can never reproduce the oral performance of this trained actor-showman. Even the audio-recordings do not faithfully reproduce the ambience and Mikey's emotive, gesticulated and aura-creating performances. Not even Benjamin Bratt was capable of capturing Mikey's intellectual-artistic numen and charisma

in the acclaimed feature film “Piñero.” Here was a wiry, short (five-foot-four on tip toes?), scruffy, blood-shot-eyed, hoarse-throat performer who threatened as much power and danger as when he was a street-gang leader, creating and performing some of the most challenging poetry possible.

How incongruous was it that he had left his prison cell to garner one of the United States’ top awards for playwriting, the 1973-1974 New York Drama Critics’ Award for Best American Play and to win one of the most elite fellowships for artists, the Guggenheim? The “Best *American Play*” award to a Puerto Rican writing from within a Sing Sing cell? From where he stood, the irony of these accolades did not pass him by. Piñero’s poems, as well as his plays, questioned the very nature of what it is to be an American, and whether the under-class and marginalized are truly part of that national complex of malls, corporations, high culture, militaristic intervention and conquest that he cursed in “La Cañonera del Mundo.” Writing from the very battlefield where cultures and social classes clash, it is understandable that in one instance he would write, “le escupo al viento que te acarició/te hablo a ti, bandera americana,” and in another, “I am . . . 100% AMERICAN.” In the former, he indicted American imperialism, and in the latter he provided a paean to the American Dream:

then come the bravest . . . and then
still inside . . . come . . . they one by one
die . . . that others may dream of reaching
the top
of the ladder
and they’re close to
heaven it’s then
the best thing for the
pursuit of happiness
for women & men
and eternal roots . . . a symbol
of life entwined in Liberty (“And Then Come Freedom to Dream” 66)

Seriously, ironically . . . was Piñero as an impoverished and oppressed urban denizen embarked on a mission of vengeance, to strike back with his pen at American society, where his “shiv” and other weapons and criminal ventures had only landed him in prison? Was the failed criminal now the outlaw on the cultural map, speaking

Introduction to the Poetry of Miguel Piñero

the unspeakable in an authentic but frequently censored American argot, depicting the formerly ignored sentiments of the people at street level who suffer for the decisions made by politicians and corporate leaders, feeding the prurient imaginations of the middle and upper classes who fear and rarely confront the people living in urban danger zones. Was the pimp Piñero hawking scenes and insights to middle-class johns, proverbially forced to witness the low life while sitting trapped in a subway toilet, as in his short play, “Paper Toilet”? Are we Piñero’s ultimate johns, as readers and audience? Was he a pornographer, guiding us through his peep show, hoping perhaps not to entice and shock us, revealing as deeply human the barrios, ghettos and prisons and challenging all of our preconceptions?

All of the above is truer for the plays, which as a genre require the intervention of middle-class cultural institutions for their production and are more likely to be seen by members of the same bourgeois society Piñero sought to shock and educate. The poetry, on the other hand, was pitched more to his own neighborhood in the Lower East Side, to be read on street corners or at the Nuyorican Poets’ Café. Despite all of his melancholy, Piñero believed in the power of poetry to awake and educate his own people:

words
strong & powerful crashing thru
walls of steel & concrete
erected in minds weak (“La Bodega Sold Dreams” 3)

His poetry is more bilingual than his plays, often more intimate, frequently self-directed and elucidating. In his poems, Piñero motivated his community to consider the origins and circumstance of its oppression, but he also explored his own psyche, love, hope and, ultimately, disillusionment. After his much beloved and quoted “Lower East Side Poem,” in which he pledged his undying allegiance to that neighborhood, what can be more heartbreaking than his later assessment in “The Lower East Side Is Taking. . .”:

The Lower East Side
taking my life
away . . .

Not one damn block
belongs to me,
not one damn brick! (65)

This tone of regret pervades much of Piñero's more intimate verse and engulfs all expressions of love; for true, romantic love, as perceived by Piñero in popular culture and longed for by him, was impossible, given Mikey's lifestyle. Yet the yearning for it never ceased:

Where do the purple curtains
colored pain of love lost
the blue conversation of love lost
fall and merge into . . . ("Where Do the Colors . . ." 71)

He can only hope for a better world tomorrow in which love is possible:

PERHAPS TOMORROW
OUR HEARTS
Will cease to be
An ocean of pain
Or a river of suffering
And a mountain of desires
For a tomorrow of fantasy ("PERHAPS TOMORROW" 58)

Instead, Piñero offered us in both serious and humorous works the distortion of love in the underworld sex trade. It is the only reflection possible in Piñero's topsy-turvy world at the margin of established society, where pimps and hoes, johns and cons, cross-dressers and pedophiles parade and commit outrageously lewd sexual acts as the most natural behavior. In his burlesque epic "Rerun of 'The Ballad of the Freaks,'" Piñero fantasized a parade of creatures from film, comic books and television competing to outdo each other in a raucous orgy of sexual deviance, causing rivers of ejaculate to inundate the streets of the city. It is Piñero's inversion of such media extravaganzas as the Oscars, the Miss America Pageant and high society galas in what Mikhail J. Bakhtin would identify as a carnivalesque exercise in inverting the world order. More pronounced in such plays as "The Sun Always Shines for the Cool" than in most of his poetry, this topsy-turvy world is basic to Piñero's outlaw ideology and his esthetics: "lo malo se pone bueno y lo bueno se pone malo" ("La gente que no se quiere pa' na con la lengua" 32). It accounts for his prolific use of streetwise profanity, his celebration of petty criminals and primitive rebels, his individual and lonely stance against the overwhelmingly oppressive authority that so frequently incarcerated him, at times trying to reform him, make him "normal":

Me, seventeen,
and all the therapeutic
verbs, nouns, adjectives
that sent psychologists,
sociologists and every-ologist
and their grandmother
scrambling thru Freudian
terminology dictionaries
where once it was chic
to turn the pitiable poor
personality disordered
junkie . . . (“The High Don’t Equal the Low” 72)

But Piñero was not and always refused to be what he considered “normal” in a corrupt and hypocritical society. In the ultimate analysis, the “freakish” environment was the most comfortable home for Piñero, who identified with his marginalization, celebrated it and created for himself the persona of the outlaw. He found more honesty and integrity among prison inmates, sex workers and street people than he ever did in the representatives of normal society and its institutions. Ironically, it is Piñero the freak, the maladjusted outsider to be gawked at pruriently as in a carnival or circus “sideshow” (also the concept for his play by this title), who competes with the more menacing Piñero the outlaw.

Reader, which of the two speaks to you most?



INTRODUCTION TO THE DRAMA OF MIGUEL PIÑERO

BY JORGE IGLESIAS

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Of the three distinctive branches of Hispanic theatre of the United States—ie., native, immigrant and exile—the native¹ branch stands out by virtue of the rapidity in which it has developed in a relatively short period of time. From the social commitment of Luis Valdez's early works to the feminist plays of Dolores Prida, Hispanic theatre of the native tradition exhibits a wide variety of styles, themes, settings, characters and situations. The tradition that began with Valdez's innovative *actos*—which resulted from the desire to find a suitable medium to express the feelings and concerns of the Hispanic community in the United States—has made a special place for itself in the universal history of drama, as it has come to establish dialogue not only within itself, but also with the work of playwrights that belong to the universal canon, such as Tennessee Williams, in the case of Cherríe Moraga, and August Strindberg, whose *The Stronger* serves as a metatext for Prida's *Coser y cantar*. When one considers the various contributions to this rich tradition, the work of Puerto Rican-born Miguel Piñero (1946-1988) represents an exceptional case in many ways. Despite the fact that he spent almost a third of his life in prison, Piñero was the recipient of several awards and grants, including the 1973-1974 New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for his play *Short Eyes* and the Guggenheim Fellowship for playwriting. Also an actor, Piñero appeared in various Hollywood films, including

¹ For an overview and description of these three trajectories of U. S. Hispanic culture, see Kanellos, "A Schematic Approach to Understanding Latino Transnational Literary Texts."

Short Eyes, in television movies and in several episodes of *Miami Vice*, for which he also wrote scripts. An outstanding figure of the Nuyorican movement, Piñero was one of the founders of the Nuyorican Poets' Cafe, in which the Puerto Rican community of New York found a space to express itself freely. More recently, the playwright's life and work have become the subject of the film *Piñero* (2001), attesting to the popularity of Piñero both as an author and, perhaps more prominently, as the embodiment of freedom and dissent. Given the interest that Piñero has inspired in popular culture, it is surprising that there are still no works of scholarship dedicated solely to the study of this author's achievement in the theatrical field. The purpose of this essay is to explore the elements that compose Miguel Piñero's work and to establish his contribution to the native Hispanic theatre of the United States. As it will be seen, Piñero's output is framed by three different contexts: the Nuyorican movement, prison literature and outlaw culture. A study of Piñero's work in these contexts—all of which are united in the strong sense of marginality that constitutes the main concern of Piñero's writings—will help to establish and to value his tremendous achievement.

THE NUYORICAN MOVEMENT

In order to appreciate Piñero's work fully, his career must be regarded in the light of the Hispanic tradition in the United States, since the underlying concept that binds Piñero's writings is his position as a member of a minority within a dominant group. The situation of uncertainty, or the identity crisis, that this position entails gave rise to many Hispanic cultural movements within the United States, such as Chicanismo and the one that concerns us, the Nuyorican movement, which had its base in "Loisaida," or the Lower East Side (Voz xvii). In *The Nuyorican Experience*, Eugene V. Mohr articulates the Nuyorican feeling in the following words: "Where *do* [the Nuyoricans] belong? They have lost the land of their fathers and not yet found a way into the American mainstream. They are at home in a place where their needs for social and human recognition go unsatisfied. And so they have opted to create [. . .] their own society" (97). The problem of cultural ambiguity is resolved through syncretism, which can be appreciated easily in the language of native Hispanic writers in the United States. Like Luis Valdez, Carlos Morton, Josefina López and many others, Piñero wrote bilingual plays which repro-

duce the language of a culture that is conscious of its roots in the oral tradition. The Puerto Rican characters in *Short Eyes* communicate mostly in English because they interact with English-speaking characters, but they also speak Spanish among themselves in moments of greater intimacy, such as when Paco tries to seduce Cupcakes: “Yo quiero ser tuyo y quiero que tú sea mío,” Paco says, “¿Y qué tú quiere que yo haga por tí?” (*Short* 220). As evident in this quote, Piñero reproduces Puerto Rican popular speech very accurately, both in the grammatical and the phonetic sense. The best example of bilingualism in Piñero’s work, however, is the one-act play “Tap Dancing and Bruce Lee Kicks,” in which the characters speak either Spanish or English according to their interlocutor, and even engage in code-switching or Spanglish: “Bueno, la canción que me cantaste wasn’t exactly greatly accepted,” says María (*Outrageous* 182). When asked in an interview why he used Spanglish in his plays, Piñero answered simply: “That’s what we talk. That’s what we are” (Alarcón McKesson 57). A more succinct answer could not be given. Piñero saw bilingualism as an intrinsic characteristic of the Nuyorican, and so his plays reflect this aspect of his culture.

Regarding characters, native Hispanic theatre in general concerns itself neither with epic heroes nor with melancholy characters driven by the nostalgia of a lost home, so common in Hispanic immigrant and exile plays. The native Hispanic author says as much about the United States as any other type of American author. In the particular case of Piñero, his plays offer the audience a view of the “lower depths” of the social scale, from the prison inmates to the dwellers of New York tenements. As Nicolás Kanellos and Jorge Huerta point out in *Nuevos Pasos*, “Piñero’s theatre is a milestone for its introduction to the stage of characters who previously appeared only as stereotypes, but now assume real lives of their own: the immigrant, the convict, the numbers runner, the pimp, the prostitute, the john” (173). Piñero’s characters are, above all, human, like the man who runs out of toilet paper and whose pants are stolen in “Paper Toilet,” and the homosexual who confronts his conservative parents in “Irving.” Many Puerto Ricans appear in Piñero’s works, most notably in “Sideshow,” a one-act play that depicts the extreme measures minorities are driven to in their struggle for survival in the urban jungle. Malo the Merchant sells fake watches and drugs, Clearnose Henry is a “glue-sniffer” and China holds the drugs that her boyfriend sells. All of these characters

are teenagers, between the ages of thirteen and sixteen, whose innocence has been destroyed by the brutality of the environment in which they struggle to live. The system does not care about them and they literally represent—as the title of the play indicates—a sideshow: an unpleasant reality that exists at the margin of the dominant culture, a subordinate event. The desperate circumstances in which they find themselves make Piñero's characters aesthetically acceptable and often worthy of sympathy. It is not difficult to sympathize with Dominick Skorprios, the Greek immigrant of *A Midnight Moon at the Greasy Spoon*, who gets deported after marrying a woman that he believed to be Puerto Rican. Even characters like David Dancer, the pimp who is about to be shot as the curtain closes in *Eulogy for a Small Time Thief*, are portrayed humanely. Piñero's characters are not examples of virtue; that does not mean that they cannot be depicted as human beings, however fallen they are.

In the Nuyorican context of Piñero's plays, the choice of a bilingual, oral language and of dispossessed characters points to one of the main purposes of native Hispanic literature, namely the desire to challenge hegemony. As Kanellos points out, “Los *nuyoricán* crearon un estilo y una ideología que todavía domina la escritura hispana urbana de hoy, que se enorgullece de ser obrera y no pide disculpas por su falta de educación formal” (*Voz* xxx). Oral and bilingual language opposes the official discourse as much as dispossessed characters stand in contrast to “respectable” members of society. By making these two elements a crucial part of his work, Piñero emphasizes the counter-hegemonic nature of his culture, an ethnic group that has always existed parallel to the dominant culture, and whose voice Piñero expresses in the form of a scream in the face of respectability.

PRISON LITERATURE

Perhaps the most significant element of Piñero's plays when regarded as examples of prison literature is the choice of a restricted space as setting. All theatre is subject to the limits of some form of stage, but unity of space is not mandatory. Several playwrights, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Tennessee Williams, Samuel Beckett and Peter Weiss have experimented with restricted areas in their effort to depict the interaction of human beings who are forced to coexist in a state of imprisonment. In most cases, this situation is optimal for representing dehumanization, as can be seen in Sartre's *No Exit* (1945), Weiss'

Marat/Sade (1964) and Beckett's *Endgame* (1957), or even in Luis Buñuel's film *El ángel exterminador* (1962). Piñero contributes to this tradition by presenting a variety of restricted spaces in which his characters enter into conflict with each other. The jail, which serves as setting for *Short Eyes*, is the restricted space *par excellence*, in which characters struggle to survive and find opposition not so much in authority as among themselves. In this instance, hell is truly "other people," as Sartre would have it, and the only way for the inmates to escape this hell and reclaim their humanity is through a sense of fraternity and community, an ideal that, as Fiona Mills observes, is tightly related to the community-building purpose of Latino/a theatre in the 1960's (45-46). The jail, however, is not the only restricted space in Piñero's work; as a matter of fact, of all his plays only *Short Eyes* takes place in this particular setting. The action of *A Midnight Moon at the Greasy Spoon* develops in a small worker's luncheonette in the Times Square area; *The Guntower* is set—as the title indicates—in a prison guntower; and *Paper Toilet*, by far the most extreme instance of a closed space, takes place in a subway station public restroom. It is not surprising, given these choices in setting, that an atmosphere of claustrophobia pervades Piñero's plays. Roberto Irizarry goes as far as to relate this atmosphere with *insularismo*, Antonio Pedreira's notion of self-isolation as a component of the Puerto Rican national ethos (77). However debatable one might find this association, Irizarry's view of confinement as a reality that transcends racial distinctions is certainly a pertinent one. As the same critic observes, a white man is the object of derision and violence in *Short Eyes*, and *Irving* shows a Jewish man "coming out of the closet" (it would be difficult to find a more appropriate metaphor) as he confesses to his bourgeois family that he is a homosexual (Irizarry 87). Piñero's characters are thus shaped by the reduced environment in which they move. Character and setting are inseparable in this case, and whether Piñero's personal experience in prison or *insularismo* accounts for this is ultimately beside the point.

Speaking about the prison system in the United States leads us to the issue of race, since a disproportionate percentage of inmates in U. S. prisons is made up of racial minorities. Ethnicity plays an important role in all of Piñero's work, in keeping with the native Hispanic consciousness as an ethnic group that must struggle for its rights and for equality in a society dominated by a different group. Significantly enough,

the first two major Hispanic plays to be presented on Broadway—Piñero's *Short Eyes* and Luis Valdez's *Zoot Suit*—deal in one way or another with the criminalization of Latinos. In a recent article, Ashley Lucas analyzes the responses of New York reviewers to these two works, responses that are characterized by racial prejudice. While *Zoot Suit* received many negative reviews, *Short Eyes* was afforded more praise, a phenomenon that Lucas attributes to the two plays' different attitudes toward power. "Piñero's characters," Lucas says, "struggle against their own shortcomings as well as the power structures which confine them," while the characters in *Zoot Suit* "fight primarily against the system" (132). If Valdez's play appears to be more counter-hegemonic than *Short Eyes*, however, this is not due to any type of timidity on Piñero's part, but to artistic subtlety. Piñero's more anti-establishment plays, such as *The Guntower*, have not enjoyed the success of *Short Eyes* because they express blatantly what *Short Eyes* presents in a more implicit manner. The fact is that the system plays a strongly repressive role in *Short Eyes*, not only through the prison itself, but also by fomenting division and animosity among prisoners, a task that is carried out precisely by stressing and exploiting the racial barriers that divide the inmates (Hames-García 168). The only character in the play who tries to breach this barrier is Juan Otero, who risks his reputation by seeking to understand Clark Davis. Despite his noble effort, however, Juan is not able to check the tragic development of events that ends with Davis' murder. The system, with its ethnic divisions (encouraged by the jail guards), is simply too strong and implacable. Piñero thus depicts a society divided by racial prejudices and exposes a prison system in which citizens are not reformed but led to brutality.

Before addressing the final aspect of Piñero's plays to be considered here, it must be stated that language also plays an essential role in Piñero's works from the perspective of prison literature, as the playwright seeks to reflect the slang spoken by inmates. This purpose is most clear in *Short Eyes*, the title of which is derived from "short heist," which is prison slang for pornographic materials (Alarcón McKesson 56) but in the argot developed by Piñero has come to mean "pederast." The first edition of the play, in fact, includes a glossary of prison slang terms to assist the reader. This is another example of Piñero showing his ability to let his characters express themselves in their language, which is once again the language of a minority: a

closed group of inmates. As Douglas Taylor observes in “Prison Slang and the Poetics of Imprisonment,” prison language is driven by an impulse of deterritorialization in the face of authority. “Prison writing,” Taylor says, “draws on the deterritorializing impulses of prison slang in order to [. . .] challenge the official discourse of the state regarding the nature of such things as crime and criminals, punishment and justice” (242). Prison slang is to Authority what Spanglish or code-switching is to the dominant culture. In both cases, Piñero exalts the position of the subaltern, giving him a voice that is suitable to his circumstances, a voice that allows him to express himself on his own terms.

OUTLAW CULTURE

It would be highly inadequate to speak of Piñero without addressing the issue of the outlaw aesthetic, as all of his works illustrate the outlaw way of life in one form or another. The figure of the outlaw has a long history behind it, and it can best be understood through Eric Hobsbawm’s famous notion of the social bandit.² Numerous books have been published on the subject, such as Paul Kooistra’s *Criminals as Heroes: Structure, Power & Identity*, in which historical figures such as Frank and Jesse James, Billy the Kid and Butch Cassidy are studied in the light of Hobsbawm’s theories. Unlike Hobsbawm, however, Kooistra does not regard the social bandit as a strictly rural phenomenon that cannot exist in modern society; on the contrary, modern developments such as the media and the idea of mass culture facilitate the existence of outlaw celebrities (161). Piñero himself has gone from convicted felon to the subject of a film, and interest in his work continues to grow.

What, then, is the meaning of outlaw culture? Miguel Algarín has established the parameters of this social and aesthetic position in the introduction to *Nuyorican Poetry*, the anthology that he co-edited with Piñero:

Wherever the true outlaw goes he alarms the balance of unjust authority. He refuses to be intimidated and repressed. [. . .] The outlaw can be out there confronting the outside by himself or he can be part of an organized action. Most outlaws in New York are on their own. They find “organizing” slow and

² See Hobsbawm’s *Primitive Rebels*.

disappointing, often leading to humiliation because the general will is not compatible with theirs. The independent outlaw will “Kill, Kill, Kill” [the title of one of Piñero’s poems in the collection *La Bodega Sold Dreams*] rather than adjust and accommodate to insults and powerlessness. [. . .] The outlaw is morally free to act, to aggress against authority because he realizes that that is his power: he goes for broke whether it is for himself or for his friends or for his people. (26-27)

The characters in Piñero’s *The Sun Always Shines for the Cool* constitute the perfect illustration of this attitude. Cat Eyes, the pimp who shows no scruples in his struggle to survive, is the embodiment of the outlaw spirit. To him, the end justifies the means, even if he has to turn Chile, the girl who loves him, into a prostitute. This type of behavior, which would be aberrant to a member of respectable society, has no negative moral implications for Cat Eyes. This does not mean, nevertheless, that there is no moral code for outlaws. Viejo, Chile’s father, does follow a moral code based on honor when he announces his desire to kill Cat Eyes before the pimp can ruin his daughter. Outlaws come into conflict with each other when their individual struggles lead them to trespass each other’s boundaries. The outlaw, therefore, lives in constant danger: having rejected the rules of established society, he accepts the rules of survival that govern the streets. As Viejo puts it: “You go out there on the streets and you meet [. . .] the world of greed and whatever other names have been defined for those that seek something outside the acceptances of society . . . and you stand with your balls exposed in this jungle of fear . . . and you battle . . . and you fight the hardest fight of your life” (*Sun* 32). Outlaw culture, then, can be described neither as immoral nor as amoral; rather, it makes up its own set of rules at the margin of respectable society. Viejo’s tragic decision to shoot himself at the end of the play is ultimately the recognition of an inability to live by the outlaw code. Having been humiliated by both established and outlaw society, Viejo renounces life altogether in an act of self-sacrifice.

As is to be expected from a playwright who paid close attention to the rhythm and nuances of speech, Piñero also portrays outlaw culture through the language that his characters employ. One of the most notable features of Piñero’s plays is the abundant profanity, an element that is directly related to the urban and underclass setting of

these plays, the space in which the modern outlaw exists. As Carlos Morton observes, “The Nuyorican scene is a street scene, a theatre of the barrio. Its ghetto artists paint the dialectics of survival” (44). When describing the way in which the first Nuyorican plays came into being, Miguel Algarín stresses the playwrights’ preoccupation with street language as a part of the urban reality they sought to portray in their works: “We looked for theatrical language that realistically portrayed life on avenues D, C, B and A, unlike the Hollywood versions epitomized by *Kojak* or *Baretta*” (*Action* xv). Furthermore, in his introduction to *Nuyorican Poetry*, Algarín states, “The impulse to create a language that can absorb aggression without fantasy thrives among people who are in situations of extremities” (24). Established society favors respectability, propriety and decorum. The outlaw expresses himself in terms that many would consider vulgar, not so much out of reaction to established society, but because those terms are the ones that best describe the urban marginalized culture in which he moves, an environment characterized by noise, filth, crowdedness, violence and decay. For Piñero the outlaw playwright, nothing is obscene; urban reality, and the reality of the dispossessed, must be brought to the stage in the raw. In Piñero’s plays, therefore, the foul language that offends so many spectators and readers is one of the elements that bestow dramatic credibility on the characters presented.

As has been shown, Piñero’s work addresses issues that are pertinent to three different literary niches. In the sphere of Nuyorican literature, Piñero’s achievement resides in his ability to portray a racial and cultural minority realistically, with both compassion and pride. Piñero’s beloved Lower East Side provides not only the setting for a few of his plays, but also the cultural spirit that characterizes all of them, which is expressed in terms of bilingualism and opposition to the dominant culture. The urban reality of New York Puerto Ricans is thus elevated and presented to whomever wants to participate in it. Piñero, it must be noted, was instrumental not only in bringing the stage to the streets, but also in bringing the streets to the stage. Where prison literature is concerned, the presentation of *Short Eyes* has been tremendously influential. Not only does the play portray prisoners and their daily struggle, it also comments on the system’s criminalization of Hispanics and minorities in general. Through *Short Eyes*, Piñero contributed to the subgenre of restricted-space drama, a tradition that links his work not only to that of Sartre and Weiss, but also to that of

contemporary playwrights who have chosen to explore similar settings and themes. Today, it is difficult to overlook Piñero's influence on the work of Stephen Adly Guirgis, especially in his prison play *Jesus Hopped the A Train* (2001), which closely resembles Piñero's work in setting, theme, language and choice of characters. Finally, Piñero is also an exponent of outlaw literature, as his works express the feelings and disposition of those who have rejected social standards and composed their own personal code of morality outside of the system. These three aspects of Piñero's plays are brought together by the main theme of marginality, which is central to every one of his works. Being a rebel himself, Piñero felt drawn to those who have been left out of established society, something that is not surprising in one who took pride in being "a problem of this land / [. . .] the Philosopher of the Criminal Mind / a dweller of prison time / a cancer of Rockefeller's ghettocide" (*Bodega* 5). A second aspect that unites the three areas in which we have placed Piñero is a deep concern for language. Each area has its distinct approach to language: bilingualism and the oral tradition are integral parts of Nuyorican culture, prison slang allows prisoners to challenge the official discourse, and profanity is the outlaw's native tongue. A comprehensive study of Piñero's use of language is yet to be written.

In conclusion, Miguel Piñero represents a unique case in the history of Hispanic drama in the United States. His achievement assumes great merit when one considers the harsh circumstances under which he lived. His work is a testimony and homage to the struggle that Hispanic culture has always carried out in its effort to assert itself as a strong presence in a nation that either derides it or ignores it. His tragic death—which came when he was at the height of his artistic career—represents a severe loss and an implicit condemnation of a system in which many are left behind. His legacy, however, lives on, and we can hope that the renewed interest in Piñero's work will lead more and more audiences and readers to appreciate the work of this Nuyorican poet and outlaw, whose message carries today the same power and vitality that it had when it was first expressed.

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