OUTLAW
THE COLLECTED WORKS OF
MIGUEL PIÑERO
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MIGUEL PIÑERO
Also by Miguel Piñero

La Bodega Sold Dreams
Outrageous One-Act Plays
The Sun Always Shines for the Cool
OUTLAW
THE COLLECTED WORKS OF
MIGUEL PIÑERO

Introduction by Nicolás Kanellos
and Jorge Iglesias

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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
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  
scurrying through 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—i.e., native, immigrant and exile—the native 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 seas mío,” Paco says, “¿Y qué tú quieres 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 Skorpios, 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 nuyorican 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—Píñero’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. “Píñero’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 Píñero’s part, but to artistic subtlety. Píñero’s more anti-establishment plays, such as *The Gun Tower*, 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. Píñero 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 Píñero’s plays to be considered here, it must be stated that language also plays an essential role in Píñero’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 Píñero 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 Píñero 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. 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

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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.
Introduction to the Drama of Miguel Piñero

Works Cited


PREVIOUSLY UNPUBLISHED POEMS FROM THE CYCLE OF LA BODEGA SOLD DREAMS
Obreras

quizás soy profeta
que de mi celda veo
las gotas de sudor que
corren por la frentes
de mi hermanas trabajadores
caan en las máquinas de
cocer
de la madrugada hasta
la muerta del sol
y nacimiento de luna
en ese calor de cocina
que llaman factoría
broadway y lafayette

quizás soy espiritista
siento dolor en mis piernas
cuerpo cansado
no simpatista
luchando hora tras hora
por una miseria
desayuno taza de café
los ojos del boss
penetrando un espíritu
malo
en las espaldas
tocada sexual del foreman
las miradas de los títeres
manos de tecatos en las
carteras
en el subway empaquetados
como animales
los americanos comunican la
falta de baño
y
ansiedades por despedir
ese olor malo
y
el otro día
la misma lucha con la vida
a buscar el peso
el mismo pugilato
la mismo tira y tápate
¿qué eso que llaman
lunch break?
almuerzo de
hot dog y coca cola
sí
quizas soy profeta
porque el ojo de mi mente
agarra para mi corazón
todos dolores
de mis hermanas,
obrares
alma de mi esperanza
ve
un nuevo día que
mata la tarde de opresión
una gran unión de obreras
acaban con el maltrato que le
pega a sus espíritus libres
sueño
sueño
que veo
en las calles do noo joll
miles y miles
de obreras
gritando con el ánimo
de una sola
voz

BASTA YA. . . .
Declaration 1968

This child . . .
this child felt the cold storms of winter
on those hot summer days . . .
this child went hungry on the banquet table
of the church . . .
this child played with roaches and rats for pets
and found her sister lying dead
beneath a bottle cap . . .

YES, MOTHERFUCKERS, I AM MILITANT

this child was innocent
of the big money plays
was ignorant of the teachers’
racist ways . . .
this child knew not why her brother died
in a foreign land—killed by her brother’s hands—

YES, I AM A RADICAL

this child cried at the movies
laughed at mickey mouse & reached the twilight
of sleep with story-book fantasies of
a white knight on a white horse
loving his white lady fair
in a white dress
cheated by a black mistress
in a white dream . . .

this child walked happy
to religious instructions in
her second-hand clothes

and slept restlessly on a
lice-infested bed . . .

YES, YOU DEGENERATE MOTHERFUCKERS,
I AM A REVOLUTIONARY

can you feel the anger in my heart
can you see the tears fall from my face
can you see them
these tears
that control the hate? . . .

Because. . . . this child was wanted
dead . . .
Bastard Streets

The rain showered down un tumbao
a conga beat
on bastard streets

its music memories me back
to any hot scorch july on bay 13

Bastard streets soakin’ with polluted rain
active detergent washin’ saturday nights
fanfair & blood rites
over manhole into the livin’ room
of twenty-foot rats & waterbugs

Bastard streets supportin’ walkin’ mumblin’
zombies fishin’ for substances in white powder
sewers
communicatin’ with god at the point of a needle gun

Bastard streets
screamin’ colors fly high on the back on young
nations
blowin’ each other away as easy as they blow a quarter
in a jukebox

Colors that stride a rumble sway on blacktop streets

fowl stink breath bastard streets
broken wine bottles keep a steady almost competitive
toll with the cheerful cry of broken souls
the depressed laughter of broken homes

vaya, juega, for the tuberculosis spit
pregnatin’ the hollow hallways of tenement ruins
with the melodies of young latin hands beatin’
telephone therapy on garbage can tops/sides of milk crates
beer bottles & cans . . .

mothers sufferin’ from police bullets sirens
blastin’ holes in silent huracán nights
on bastard streets
wild elephant farts perfume 42nd street movie houses
updrift/upstage sweet smell & sounds of marijuana
poppin' eyes
peeps y over your shoulders, chantin' tongues slap dry lips
heavy breath makes it uneasy almost impossible

DAMMIT MOTHERFUCKIN’ MIERDA
you can’t even take a piss in these
Bastard streets . . .
Sideshow

The people in the play.

HECTOR (the Man, from 11 to 13 years old, Puerto Rican)
MALO (the Merchant, 15 to 16 years old, Puerto Rican)
CLEARNOSE HENRY (13 to 15 years old, glue-sniffer, Puerto Rican)
TUTU (the Smoke Dealer, 16 to 18 years old, Black)
CHINA (Tutu’s girl, 14 to 16 years old, Puerto Rican)
SUGAR (prostitute, 15 to 18 years old, Puerto Rican)
LUCKY (pimp, 17 to 18 years old, very handsome, Puerto Rican)
PANCHO KID (hustler, 15 to 17 years old, Puerto Rican)
CISCO (apprentice hustler, 12 to 14 years old, Puerto Rican)
CUSTOMER (jíbaro, 25 to 30 years old, Puerto Rican)
SUPER (35 to 40 years old, Black)
The latter two roles should be played by the oldest dude in the cast. The first voice in the play should be male, and the second voice should be female and motherly. The dance scene should be contemporary dancing.

HECTOR: Hurry, hurry, step right up and see the baddest show in town for only fifty cents.
MALO: Hi, I’m Malo the Merchant. I see anything and everything. Anyone care to buy a watch... cheap?
NILSA: Hey, mira, Malo, ¿quieres comprar un television brand new? I just liberated it.
MALO: No.
NILSA: Come on, man... my jones is coming down... it’s brand new...
MALO: Brand new! Are you crazy? What you think I am, a sap? Shit, this thing has a broken antenna... channel button is missing...
NILSA: How much you give me?
MALO: Twenty dollars.
NILSA: Twenty dollars? Man, come on, Malo, don’t be like that.
MALO: Man, I ain’t gonna make the market scene with you, brother. Twenty dollars, take it or leave it.
NILSA: I’ll take it... later, Malo.
MALO: Later.
TUTU: What’s happening, people? I’m Tutu. I deal smoke and I do it for a living... and this here is my woman, China. She young girl... but she cool...
CHINA: I’m China, Tutu’s woman. He’s a good man. I hold his smoke... sometimes I help him make a play or run a game.
MALO: Hey, Tutu, wanna buy a T.V. set... brand new? Brotherman, dig this here... P-a-n-a-s-o-n-i-c and it’s got this new antenna... you dig... short ones so they ain’t all over the place getting in your way and shit like that...
TUTU: Okay, Malo, cut the shit short, bro. We need one for the bathroom, anyway.
MALO: Hey, man, that’s cool. This way you don’t miss out on the soap opera when you take a shit.
CHINA: Funny! Why don’t you talk that foul fuckin’ language somewhere else.
TUTU: Yeah, like, be cool, motherfucker.
MALO: Excuse me, sister . . .
TUTU: What’cha want for it?
MALO: Seventy dollars.
TUTU: Later.
CHINA: Vayaaaa.
MALO: Okay, okay, wait a second . . . thirty-five dollars . . . so, okay?
TUTU: What you think, baby?
CHINA: It’s cool with me.
MALO: Vaya. Here.
TUTU: Wait up, bro, I ain’t gonna be carrying that shit with me all day. I’m out here to make my money, bro. Look, man, you know where I live at, right? Give it to the super, okay? Tell ’im I’ll pick it up tonight. Later.
MALO: Later.
PANCHO KID: My name is Pancho Kid. I been out here hustling for two years. I do it ’cause I like the bread and the feeling. This here is Cisco.
CISCO: I’m Cisco. I’m new around here. I’m supposed to be hustling, but I ain’t making much money.
CLEARNOSE HENRY: I’m Clearnose Henry and I sniff glue because it’s a together thing.
LUCKY: How do you do? My name is Lucky and I’m a gentleman of leisure.
SUGAR: Hi, I’m Sugar. I’m Lucky’s Woman. I’m out here hustling the streets for Lucky, trying to make a living, doing the best I can for my man.
NILSA: Me, my name is Nilsa. I’m a dope fiend. Oh, yeah, and a thief.
HECTOR: Hi, my name is Hector. I’m the Man. Welcome to my world.
CHINA: Tutu, I don’t wanna hold the smoke no more.
TUTU: Why?
CHINA: ’Cause I’m getting scared, that’s why. And besides, you know, that couple from ’cross the street got busted dealing smoke last night.
TUTU: That’s because they weren’t as cool as we are, baby. And anyway, girl, if we did get busted, you think I’d let you take the weight?
CHINA: No.
TUTU: Okay, then, it’s settled. Let’s go make some money, ’cause there’s plenty of it out here.
PANCHO: Cisco come ’ere.
CISCO: What the fuck you want?
PANCHO: I’m gonna teach you something about the hustle.
CISCO: Like what?
PANCHO: Like if you gonna rip off some of your scores, make sure you keep this in mind. Rip off the old ones, ’cause they don’t fight back. Now, the young ones you got to be cool with ’cause some of them niggers may be karate black belts and what not. You dig? Now what you do with a young trick is you give them a rap like you ain’t got no place to go . . . and that you hungry and shit like that, and if you have to let a tear fall out of your eyes, then you let a tear fall out of your eyes . . . you get into their confidence . . . look around, check out the windows, the strength of the door . . . and also check out if you can cop an extra set of keys. If you cop them, get your boys and rip off the dude for everything he got . . . make sure he don’t find out you did it.
CISCO: . . . And if he does?
PANCHO: If he does, make sure your boys are packing when he comes around . . . (Shouts.) Hector, bring down the basketball.
HECTOR: Wait up, I’m looking for it.
MALO: Come ’ere, everybody, man, come ’ere. Hey, let’s do a play.
CLEARNOSE: I don’t want to be in no play.
MALO: If you don’t want to do nothin’, don’t do nothin’.
HECTOR: What kind of play?
MALO: Hold up, let me see . . . oh, yeah, remember the time we got busted, me and Clearnose . . . we got sent to Spofford . . . the time when that little kid got fucked, remember . . . ?

Everybody laughs.

MALO: (To CHINA.) You be a social worker and (To PANCHO.) you be a typist and (To NILSA.) you be a guard.
CHINA: I don’t want to be no fuckin’ social worker.
MALO: Well, you’re gonna be a fuckin’ social worker. Now we need the kid that got fucked.

Everybody looks at CLEARNOSE.
Sideshow

MALO: Why don’t you play the part of the kid?
CLEARNOSE: No way in the world you gonna get me to play that part.
EVERYBODY: Ah, come on, man, don’t be like that.
MALO: Come on, let’s do it, it’s boring around here.
CLEARNOSE: Naw, man, I don’t want to play the kid who gets fucked.
MALO: Man, how long you know me? Do it for me, bro.
CLEARNOSE: No.
MALO: I’ll give you a box of tubes.
CLEARNOSE: A box of what?
MALO: A box of glue.
CLEARNOSE: All right, all right.
MALO: I’m director.
EVERYBODY: Ahhhh, it figures, it figures.
MALO: (To PANCHO.) Come on, man.
PANCHO: (Sitting down on some steps.) I don’t want to be in it, man.
MALO: Come on. (Grabs his hand.)

MALO pushes everything out of the way, then puts everything back in the same place.

HECTOR: Malo, Malo, look what I got here, a table for the typewriter.
MALO: Naw, get out of here, that’s no good. Where did you get this from?
HECTOR: Right over there.
MALO puts it back, and picks it up again.

MALO: Hey, look what I got here, a table for the typewriter... you put it like this, and you put the typewriter right here... then the typist can go tack, tack, tack. (Makes sounds like typewriter.)

CLEARNOSE is combing his hair.

HECTOR: Come on, man, come in already... you’re not on Broadway.
MALO: Come on, come ’ere, hurry up, man.

CLEARNOSE walks in. HE attracts attention.
HECTOR: God damn, you’s a fine mother, Clearnose.
MALO: (Directing CLEARNOSE.) Go into the social worker’s office.
CHINA: (As social worker.) What’s your name?
CLEARNOSE: Clearnose.
CHINA: Clearnose what?
CLEARNOSE: Clearnose Henry.
CHINA: Room 106. (Takes CLEARNOSE to the dorm room and introduces him around.) Malo, this is Clearnose Henry. Hector, this is Clearnose Henry . . .

CHINA returns to her office, followed by HECTOR trying to grab her ass. MALO, CLEARNOSE and HECTOR sit on the floor.

MALO: Is this your first time in here?
CLEARNOSE: Yeah.
MALO: It is? Well, let me tell you what goes on around here. We eat breakfast at six, lunch at eleven and dinner at seven. Let’s see, what should we do now?
HECTOR: I got an idea, I got an idea.
MALO: What?
HECTOR: Let’s show him the psychedelic bathroom.
MALO: Naw, man, I got a better idea.
HECTOR: What?
MALO: Let’s show him the psychedelic bathroom.
HECTOR: That’s what I said, dummy.

All three get up, MALO and HECTOR grab CLEARNOSE and try to take his pants down. The landlord enters.

LANDLORD: Hey, what are you kids doin’ here? Shouldn’t you be in bed at 2 o’clock in the morning? (To MALO.) Hey, didn’t I see you around here before? I told you kids not to hang out around here . . . you’re disturbing the peace.
MALO: But, sir.
LANDLORD: (LANDLORD overtakes MALO.) If I catch you here again, I’m gonna call the cops on you.

The LANDLORD exits, HECTOR and MALO attack CLEARNOSE again. CHINA rushes in.
CHINA: Hey, what’cha doin’ to that kid? (SHE grabs CLEARNOSE.)
MALO: Oh, I know that kid from the Bronx where I live at.
CHINA: You don’t live in the Bronx . . . you live in Staten Island.
MALO: Oh, I mean I go to the Bronx just to go dancin’.

MALO starts dancing. CHINA walks away with CLEARNOSE to the office.

CHINA: What you want?

HECTOR and MALO listen outside the door.

CLEARNOSE: I want a transfer. I want a transfer. There’s a whole bunch of faggots in my dormitory trying to fuck me.
MALO: (As director.) You don’t say it like that. You be Malo and I’ll be Clearnose. This is the way you say it: “I want a transfer, I want a transfer, those kids are trying to fuck me.” (MALO says it in an angry manner.)
CLEARNOSE: (Being MALO.) You don’t say it like that, you say it like this . . . (CLEARNOSE repeats what MALO says.)
MALO: What are you doin’?
CLEARNOSE: You told me to be you!!
MALO: Stupid.
CHINA: Who are the kids, can you recognize them?
CLEARNOSE: The one with the ugly face, and the short dumb look-in’ one over there.
MALO: There’s a door there, stupid.
CHINA: No, you can’t have a transfer.
CLEARNOSE: What do you mean I can’t have a transfer?
CHINA: (Shouting.) You can’t have a transfer!

CLEARNOSE walks out of the office.

MALO: What’cha doin’, remember there’s a door there!

CLEARNOSE goes back and walks through the door and goes back to the dorm room.

MALO: You ain’t mad about what happened today? It’s just that when you got up, we forgot to tell you that the floor was just waxed, and you fell and we were trying to help you up.
HECTOR: What did they ask you in the social worker’s office?
CLEARNOSE: Nothin’, they just wanted to know more information about the robbery.
HECTOR: What robbery?
CLEARNOSE: The robbery that got me here, stupid.
MALO: That’s not what I heard. I heard you ratted us out.
CLEARNOSE: Who told you that?
MALO: A little birdie.
CLEARNOSE: I didn’t rat you out.
MALO: (To PANCHO.) Keep chickie. (MALO throws CLEARNOSE against the wall.) Yes, you did. Stop lying. (MALO starts choking him. CLEARNOSE is pushed to the floor. MALO is on top of him, strangling him.)
CLEARNOSE: Ohhhhh, the pain, the pain . . . agony, agony, agony, agony, agony, agony, etc.
CLEARNOSE rolls around on the floor, holding his throat, groaning. HE moves toward CHINA, sits on her lap, starts kissing her.
MALO: What are you doin’? You’re supposed to be dying.
HECTOR: Why don’t you die already?
MALO: You see this fist? You’re going to die for real. (MALO pushes CLEARNOSE to the floor and starts choking him again.) You ever seen in the movies when someone gets choked . . . they die, right?
CLEARNOSE: Yeah.
MALO: Then die, then.
CLEARNOSE groans some more, then dies.
CHINA: Boy-slaughter, boy-slaughter!!
HECTOR is praying and crying over CLEARNOSE, crossing himself and sobbing.
CHINA: (To HECTOR.) Come ’ere. What did you do to that kid?
MALO: Hey, leave my brother alone, leave my brother alone.
CHINA: Then you take the responsibility.
CHINA takes MALO into her office.
CHINA: Why did you kill that kid?
MALO: What kid? (Playing with her blouse.) That’s a nice blouse.
CHINA: Forget about the blouse. I asked you a question. Why did you kill that kid?
MALO: I didn’t kill nobody . . . (Still looking at the blouse.) I like the designs on your blouse. (Touching her collar and moving down to her breasts. MALO’s other hand is in his pocket masturbating.)
HECTOR: Yo, Clearnose, check this out. Malo’s jerking off. (Both HECTOR and CLEARNOSE imitate MALO.)
CLEARNOSE: Oh, shit. (HE and HECTOR start laughing and walk away.) Hey, Malo, there’s a customer coming.
CHINA: Com’on, let’s play a little longer, man.
MALO: You don’t support me, bitch. (MALO grabs his rack and starts selling clothes.) Ropa, ropa por vender caro y barato. (HECTOR runs through the middle of the rack.) What the hell you doin’? (Starts chasing HECTOR, grabs him and takes him to the rack.) Hey, what the fuck you doin’? This is my motherfuckin’ rack. Don’t play that shit with me! (MALO kicks him in the ass.)

HECTOR walks over to CLEARNOSE. CLEARNOSE calls him “stupid.” Then a customer walks in.

SUGAR: Hey, mister, you wanna have a nice time?
CUSTOMER: No, no, I don’t got no money. You take credit? Food stamps?
SUGAR: Hey, pendejo!
TUTU: (Calls customer over.) You wanna buy some smoke.
CUSTOMER: You want a cigarette? Yeah, I got a cigarette.
TUTU: No, you know, smoke, marijuana.
CUSTOMER: You shoot marijuana in your veins?
CISCO: (Holding his crotch invitingly.) Hey, mister . . .
CUSTOMER: I’ll tell your mother . . .

NILSA tries to pick his pocket. CUSTOMER sees him and starts chasing him.

MALO: Oye, pana, ven acá un momento. Mira esto. ¿Le gustaría comprarle un reloj caro barato?
CUSTOMER: ¿Qué es, hombre? Déjame quieto.
MALO: No te vayas. Mira, qué lindo es este reloj.
CUSTOMER: Wha jew say? No pica la Inglish.
MALO: Who the hell is speaking English? Jesus Christ, I’m trying to
do you a favor... an expensive watch... cheap... cheaper than
cheap... in fact, it’s so cheap that if I sell it to you any cheaper,
you’d be stealing it from me.
MALO: No, I ain’t saying you steal it. I stole it to sell it to you at a
steal. Look, forget about the word steal... I mean steal... hey,
don’t go... come ’ere... mira, qué belleza... look at it, man
... I ain’t going to bite you... mira, go on see... heavy, ah?
CUSTOMER: I don’t see nothing.
MALO: Come a little bit closer. I don’t want the police to see me.
Look... see...
CUSTOMER: I don’t have to get closer. I got 20/20 in both eyes. I see
nothing. I don’t see a thing. I don’t want it. Goo byy.
MALO: Wait, wait, look, man, oye, mira... es un Bulova...
BUUU-LUUU-VAAA for sixty dollarssss.
CUSTOMER: Bulova for sixty? Are jew kiddin’ me? I could get it for
forty dollars in the store.
MALO: You can get a Longine for forty dollars?
CUSTOMER: Longine, you said a Bulova.
MALO: It is a Bulova. I mean it’s a Bulova watch with a Logine band.
It’s what they call a Bulogine. You musta heard the commercials
on T.V., you do have a T.V.? “If it’s a Bulogine, it’s real keen,”
right?
CUSTOMER: Yes, sí, sí, I got a T.V., everybody has a T.V.
MALO: No, because if you don’t have one, I can get you a nice T.V.
... color... cheap... very nice buy.
CUSTOMER: Bulogine, huh?
MALO: Okay, dig this: I’ll let you have it for sixty dollars, and when
you come back for the T.V.
CUSTOMER: Sixty dollars? Thirty-five dollars is the most money I
can afford. I don’t want no T.V.
MALO: Thirty-five dollars for a Bulogine... what you take me for?
CUSTOMER: I take you for nothing, because you are nothing... a
junkie... tecato.
MALO: Okay, it’s true, I’m a dope fiend, pero no tengo el bicho de
carton.
CUSTOMER: Thirty-five dollars, that’s it, no more, no less . . . maybe less . . . but no more.

MALO: Look, man, forty dollars, please . . . if I wasn’t sick, you think I’d be selling this watch? My wife bought it for me last week. Look, when you come back for the T.V. I’ll give it to you cheaper by five . . . no, ten dollars.

CUSTOMER: Wait a minute. I don’t want no T.V., color or black and white. I don’t know where you got that idea from. If you want forty dollars, you don’t want to sell the watch to me. Maybe somebody else will pay you sixty or forty dollars, but not me. Thirty-five dollars and that’s it . . . take it or leave it. I got to go home. Goo byy.


CUSTOMER: Okay, here. (Walking away.) Qué soqueta . . . thirty-five dollars for a Bulogine.

MALO: Thirty-five dollars for a Bulogine . . . some people you can see them coming a mile away . . . a seven-dollar Timex with a famous label. Hi, I’m Malo the Merchant. Malo in Spanish means bad, not bad as in bad, but bad as in good. They call me Malo the Merchant because I’m good at what I do. I’m so good, it’s terrible. It’s bad, that’s why I’m Malo-bad. Can you dig it? What do I do? You just witnessed me in action. Some of my friends say I can talk the handle off a pot. I’ve never tried, but I don’t doubt that I can do it. That’s one of the tools of my trade: my tongue and these labels. I got all kinds of labels. The little woman at home hard at work sewing on famous labels on second-hand clothes. After I take them out the cleaners, just like new. Maybe you’ll like a suit . . . very cheap . . . (Laughs.) . . . yeah . . . I can take a cheaply made T.V. set from some obscure company from a country you never even heard of and give glory with my labels and with my tongue . . . here, take a look at this tongue of mine . . . see it . . . all red with the fire of speech. I could have been a preacher . . . hell-fire and brimstone . . . don’t think I ain’t hip to the mind game . . . turned around collar . . . shit, only thing is my words kept falling out of the Bible . . . and then once I got caught in bed with the preacher’s wife . . . weren’t too bad . . . if he hadn’t decided to join us . . . three is a crowd. Malo the Merchant . . . I like my
own name . . . it’s got a certain ring to it . . . everybody needs some type of recognition . . . I ain’t no different than anyone else. I thought of being a dealer one time, but like you really don’t make no bread. If you is a small timer, too many people to be paid, too many people come up short. Burglary is climbing too high and as you go up, so can you come down. I hate mugging. First of all, you’re taking someone’s payday check, ’cause not many mug the big execs. As a merchant I only take what they were goin’ to waste on beers in some greasy spoon saloon. Then sometimes you hit a drunk that wants to fight and you got to off him or he vomits all over you and you stink so bad ain’t no pusher wanna sell you a thing. Now, I know, ’cause you see me greasy as a pork chop you think I stink. Well, this is only an accessory of my trade. I got more veins at home than a little bit . . . got it like the feds . . . everyone likes to deal and wheel. Me, I just wheel the deals. I got something for everybody. Nobody goes away empty-handed when you come and see Malo the Merchant. . . . White boys from the suburbs . . . in a way I am the cause of the state’s great concern with drugs nowadays. When they came to me, I got it for them . . . never turn one of them down. They came, I gave, they took and they all got hooked, kinda like a poem. That’s when dope became a terrible plague, destroying the youth of our nation. Well, not my nation, their nation, ’cause for years it had been destroying our nation and no one gave a good fuck about it. Hey, what you wanna git, whitey? Hey, whacha wanna git, Mr. Jones? You wanna nicey girlie to fuckie fuckie? I got two of everything, three of anything and you got to start out with one of nothing so you can end up with something. Someone at sometime has been taken for his poke by the sleight of hand of the Murphy Man or the words some con man spoke. Now, the dope fiends are ruining the name of a hell of a game. When are we gonna yell out no more fucking dope? You are surprised that I, a dope fiend, would make such a distinction between me and my peers? But you see, the time before this there was the time before that and that’s where I live, in the time before this.

HECTOR: My father said Malo can rap and lie, I mean LIE. My father said Malo should be a politician or a newspaper man, ’cause he can lie like a book.
CHINA: *(Holding a radio.)* Hey, listen to this. *(Music gets louder. Everybody begins dancing.)*

LUCKY enters and interrupts the dance.

LUCKY: Hey, bitch, where’s my money?

SUGAR: What money?

LUCKY: My money, bitch, the money you’re supposed to be out here hustling.

SUGAR: Get the fuck off me.

PEOPLE IN CROWD: Wooooooo! Go on, girl! Do it! Tell him about himself, etc.

LUCKY: What do you think this is, Disneyland? I want my money!

SUGAR: Don’t hit me. Who the fuck you think you are? Here I’m out on the street hustling to buy you clothes, keep you nice and warm in the house, put the gasoline in the car so that you can drive around with some fine white girl?! Boy you better dig yourself before you be by yourself.

LUCKY grabs her, twists her arms.

LUCKY: We’ll talk about that upstairs, bitch.

LUCKY bumps into TUTU.

TUTU: Why don’tcha watch where you’re going, man?

*Pause and silence.*

LUCKY: Excuse me, bro.

LUCKY sends SUGAR to the apartment.

CLEARNOSE HENRY: I’m Clearnose Henry. That’s what everybody calls me. Clearnose Henry . . . ’cause I always clear my nose before I blow my mind. Costs me two first presidents to buy me a box of tubes and coin Lincolns to cop my dream brown paper bag. I don’t slink around corners under street lamps to score, or hide in some dim-lighted muggers’ tenement hall for my pusher to appear. That bag is for dope fiends and that scene is a dragpot. Grass is too scarce in these parts and I’m scared of scag ’cause I’m scared of needles . . . faint at the sight of one. That’s why I
don’t watch those doctor shows on T.V. Excuse me a second while I pour my tubes into my dream brown paper bag. Yeah, man, that looks pretty good. Like I was saying, snuff is for old people who like to sit and nod, and LSD or sunshine, those trips they take you on are too far out, speed kills . . . oh, oh, . . . the sleep sand is rain-ing out the bottom of my dream brown paper bag. I’m going to do it, ain’t gonna talk it.

CLEARNOSE takes a sniff, then two, then a bunch faster and faster. HE goes into wows, ahhhs, yeahs, wows.

LUCKY’s apartment. Enter LUCKY pushing SUGAR into the room. LUCKY takes off his belt, strokes it and then whips SUGAR.

LUCKY: You like embarrassing me, right? ¿Te gusta?
SUGAR: But you’re nothin’ but a dog.

LUCKY intensifies beating.

LUCKY: Who the fuck you calling a dog, bitch? Why weren’t you making no money? (LUCKY stops beating SUGAR. HE puts his belt around his neck, he lights a cigarette and exits.)

SUGAR is lying on the bed. Her jones is coming down. SHE is in pain, she searches around for her dope. Finding nothing, she falls back on the bed.

SUGAR: Mama-Mama-Mama, can you hear me, Mama?
   It’s me, Mama, it’s your baby, Mama.
   Papa done hit me again, Mama.
   He was drunk, Mama. I know he ain’t my Papa, Mama, but every time you’re sleeping he comes into the room, he comes and sits on my bed and feels on my leg, Mama. Mama, he scares me when he’s like that, breathing all hard and fast and hot, spit falling on me, him shaking and groaning like an animal. I know, Mama . . . the landlord . . . the food . . . Mama, where are you?
   I didn’t mean for you to die like you did
   but you told me you’d be around
   when I needed you.
   Mama, where have you been?
Mama, where have you been?
Mama, where have you been?
Mama, I need you.
I love you.
I need you now, Mama. I need you now.
I needed you then.
And you tell me to wait ’til tomorrow,
tomorrow is here, Mama.
It’s here and it’s now yesterday, Mama.
Mama, where have you been?
Shit, Mama, I’m getting sick.
Mama, me, your baby, I needs me a fix.
Mama, I’m a junkie, Mama,
A HOPE TO DIE DOPE FIEND.
Mama, please, it beginning to hurt.
My legs, Mama, they hurt like hell.
Mama, someone is crushing them to nothing,
into powder, Mama,
into powder, Mama, white powder, Mama,
like the one I needs,
like I needed you, Mama,
like when I laid in the bed crying
from fear of the many papas
that came into my room.
Like I needed you, Mama. I needed to put my head between
the hollow of your breast, Mama,
like the johns need to put their heads between the hollow
of my breasts, Mama, and call me Mama.
Mama, they call me trickie now ’cause I’ve turned more
tricks in one night
than you turn in a lifetime. (Screams.)
Mama, it getting worse.
The monkey is traveling down my back,
calling to my mind to feed my veins.
Mama, please help me, Mama. I’m tired of turning tricks,
committing crimes. I wanna kick, I wanna fix.
I want you to need me.
Mama, I can do it with your help,
with your care, your love.
Mama, love me like you mean it Mama.
The pain open the door.
Help me, Mama, please help me, please, please, Mama,
I-I-I . . .
SHIT, YOU IS DEAD.

HECTOR enters the apartment, sits a short distance from SUGAR.

HECTOR: I remember her. She used to babysit me. She used to take
me to the park. She used to buy me ice cream and candy and all
that shit. She was fine, she was nice, but now she’s a skank! Now,
when she sees me, she asks me for money, ’cause she knows I
work at the A & P.

HECTOR leaves the apartment, a siren is heard, LUCKY comes up
running across the stage, knocks HECTOR down, yells at him, runs
over to CHINA.

LUCKY: (To CHINA.) Hold this for me!
CHINA: What is it?
LUCKY: Just hold it, bitch. I’ll be back later.

TUTU walks in. HECTOR’s crying on the floor.

TUTU: (To CHINA.) What happened to him?
CHINA: Some dude knocked him down.
HECTOR: Tutu, Tutu, some man hit me with a baseball bat and
kicked me in the stomach and took my money.
TUTU: He took all your money?
HECTOR: Yeah, 50 cents. Oh, my leg, my leg!
TUTU: (To CHINA.) Who knocked him down?
CHINA: You know the dude: Lucky the pimp. He gave me some coke
and money to hold.
TUTU: Some what?
CHINA: Some coke and money to hold.
TUTU: What are you, crazy, stupid or what?
CHINA: No, man, Tutu, I just didn’t have time to give it back. I
didn’t know what it was, anyway.
TUTU: Man, shut up. Give me that shit, and when he comes you tell
him I got it.

TUTU picks up HECTOR.
TUTU: Come on, Hector, I’ll buy you an ice cream.

TUTU and HECTOR exit. Enters LUCKY, straight to CHINA.

LUCKY: Okay, give me my shit.
CHINA: Don’t you think your shit is where it belongs: up your ass?
LUCKY: Come on, I ain’t got time for your shit.
CHINA: I already told you, your shit is where it belongs, up your ass.
LUCKY: What, you crazy bitch, you trying to beat me?

HECTOR enters, runs by him.

HECTOR: You big bully, you maricón, you . . .

TUTU enters.

TUTU: Excuse me, brother, you got your face on my woman.
LUCKY: Your woman gots something of mine.
TUTU: (To CHINA.) You got something that belongs to him?
CHINA: No.
TUTU: See, my woman got nothing of yours. Later.

LUCKY grabs TUTU by the arm.

TUTU: You got hand problems or something?
LUCKY: I told you, your woman gots something that belongs to me.
    I was running from the cops and I needed someone to dish it on,
    and your broad was standing there, so I dished it on her.
TUTU: You think my woman is dumb?
LUCKY: She is dumb. She took the shit.
TUTU: Man, I don’t want to hear that shit.

LUCKY touches TUTU.

TUTU: Now, I told you before about your hands. You got a problem, man?
LUCKY: There’s no problem. You got something of mine and I want it back.
TUTU: Well, there is a problem ’cause, you see . . . (HE starts laughing.)
LUCKY: What’s so funny, man? Let me in on the joke.
TUTU: You’re the joke, brotherman, ‘cause you see I got your shit and you ain’t getting it back.
LUCKY: I don’t want to hear that shit.
TUTU: But you’re hearing it.
LUCKY: Motherfucker.
TUTU: Let me tell you, sucker, don’t write a check your ass can’t cash. *(Pushes him.)* Back up and live.
LUCKY: Wait a second, brotherman, why fight, let’s talk. We’re in the same boat. You’re hustling out here, I’m hustling out here, you watch my back, I’ll watch your back. There’s plenty of space out here for both of us, plenty of money. *(HE catches TUTU off guard, hits him in the stomach and jabs him in the back of the neck. HE runs toward CHINA, grabs her by her throat, tears at her clothes.)*

The crowd yelling: “Get up, Tutu, get up. Get him, Tutu, etc.” TUTU grabs him and throws him back. HE falls back, LUCKY pulls a knife.

TUTU: What are you going to do with that, motherfucker?
LUCKY: I’m goin’ to cut you if you get in my way.
TUTU: You’re gonna what?
LUCKY: You heard me, motherfucker. I’m gonna cut your black ass. Get out of my way.
TUTU: Go on, cut me, go on, punk, cut me. Motherfucker, you don’t even know how to use a knife. Go on, sucker, cut me. Go on, shoot your best.

TUTU grabs the knife from LUCKY. LUCKY falls to the floor. The crowd is yelling, “Kill that motherfucker.” CHINA is yelling, “Cut him, Tutu, get him.” TUTU has LUCKY on the floor.

TUTU: I ought to cut your face for pulling a knife on me.
LUCKY: Don’t cut my face, don’t cut my face. Take my money, but don’t cut my face.

CLEARNOSE gets too close to the fight.

TUTU: Get out of the way, Clearnose, get out of the way.

LUCKY jumps and runs into the knife. SUGAR screams and MALO holds her back. The action freezes.
HECTOR: *(From the top of the roof.)* Everybody wants the king of the mountain to fall. That’s why I don’t play that game, because when you fall, you fall hard, and you get stomped with football shoes, and that’s why I don’t play that game.

PANCHO: *(Grabbing CISCO by the throat.)* Where you think you going, punk. What do you think this is, a game? This ain’t no play, hustling is for real. Stay here and watch him die. You may never get another chance to see a pimp fall.

CISCO: Leave me alone, leave me alone . . . *(Runs to the stoop and cries.)*

NILSA: Hey, blood, you all right, you want to go to the hospital? *(SHE goes through his pockets at the same time, taking his shoes and his watch, etc.)*

MALO: The cop, the cop!

*Light dims and CLEARNOSE is on the roof.*

CLEARNOSE: The city is drowning under tons of tubes of glue. Wow, the sky has backed away and the stars are doing the buga-loo blues. The buildings look like giant tubes of glue and the garbage cans hold mountains of jewels sparkling for my eyes to see. Man, J is a prophet. I am Jesus Christ reincarnated, one of the most outsight images I’ve pulled from my dream brown paper bag. Can you imagine a world without glue? You gots to have glue, you need it to hold the world together . . . and it’s store-bought. I better keep my imagination open for the cops. They found out I was with Frankie. He was my gluehead partner. We used to paste the world together up on the roofs, in the school toilets, in the subway trains. Oh, yeah, I was with him when he jumped into the tracks. That’s the day the A-train became the B, dig it, B for blood. Wow, don’t you git it? It’s a heavy joke. I mean, like the dude was all over the place: head one way, arms another, leg on the platform, a very untogether person. Man, like it ain’t like I pushed him into the tracks. Like I don’t know what they want me for . . . you know like . . . you know what I mean, you know? Right, take me a short visit into my dream brown paper bag. Yeah, that’s cool. Losing much of its power now. Oh, I wish everybody would stop saying how much they care and love.

*Lights dim while CLEARNOSE mumbles.*