

The House of Pretension: Space and Performance in Miguel Piñero's Theatre

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In "A Lower East Side Poem" (1980), the speaker employed by Nuyorican poet and playwright Miguel Piñero (1946-1988) claims his diasporic space as his ultimate destination, and, in doing so, negates the possibility of escape to any past or future utopias:

I don't wanna be buried in Puerto Rico
 I don't wanna rest in long island cemetery
 I wanna be near the stabbing shooting
 gambling fighting & unnatural dying
 & new birth crying
 so please when I die...
 don't take me far away
 keep me nearby
 take my ashes and scatter them thru out
 the Lower East Side ... (*La Bodega Sold Dreams*, 8)

By embracing his current location and closing himself up to the outside world, Piñero's poetic voice echoes a Puerto Rican tradition first studied by canonical island author Antonio S. Pedreira in his controversial essay *Insularismo* (1933). Pedreira here recognizes in a purported knack for self-isolation (hence the title) a national defensive stance toward invading armies and pirates throughout the island's history. In a way he proposes the same reactionary attitude to the presence of the United States on the island by calling for a turning back of the national psyche toward the Spanish motherland's seminal contribution to the local culture.¹ Piñero, on the other hand, suggests a more realistic acceptance of the ills and transformations brought upon Puerto Rican immigrants and their descendants. More importantly, he urges the spectator to recognize borders and links with other marginal beings that inhabit the

urban setting of New York City. Piñero's growth as a writer in correctional facilities makes his concern with walls understandable.

Born in Puerto Rico, Piñero was raised in the Lower East Side in New York City, where he became involved in crimes such as truancy, shoplifting, drug possession and armed robbery. Indirectly this was to lead him to exploit his literary talents, as it was while serving a sentence in Sing Sing Correctional Facility that he wrote his first play, *Short Eyes* (first staged in 1973). Upon being released and attaining critical acclaim for the latter play, Piñero went on to found with Miguel Algarín the Nuyorican Poet's Café in 1974; he also continued to develop a literary career that included the aforementioned poetry collection *La Bodega Sold Dreams* (1980), as well as a substantial theatrical oeuvre that included the play *The Sun Always Shines for the Cool* (1984) and the collection *Outrageous One-Act Plays* (1985).

Piñero was not making a new statement by embracing a new *insularismo* in his poetry; by then Julia de Burgos had already accepted her isolation and joined the hosts of dying outcasts in her 1953 final poetic scream "Farewell in Welfare Island." Indeed, Burgos, a poet linked initially to nationalist groups and to their defense of cultural pureness, actually developed in this poem a link between Puerto Rico and the new islands of the diaspora. The island to which she dedicated her initial nationalist poetry later became Roosevelt Island, where she was hospitalized days prior to her death and in whose poetic version nationalism turned into marginality, despondency, and solidarity with other immigrants who shared her lot.

Piñero did make an original contribution by transferring the acceptance of *insularismo*-as-marginality to the theatre and expanding it into a myriad of spatial concerns through the vocabulary of the stage. *Short Eyes* and *Outrageous One-Act Plays* stand out as prime examples of Piñero's awareness of the intimate relationship between space and identity that characterizes Puerto Rican and Nuyorican literature. That is, in these plays Piñero incorporates the spatial trope of the lodging found in the island's literature and theatre and turns it into a representation of a diasporic environment that at first glance is rigidly subdivided into impermeable social and racial groups. If Pedreira's island and its theatrical renderings shelter elite Puerto Ricans from foreign and lowly invaders, Piñero's houses of detention and slum buildings confine Nuyoricans to limited quarters defined by their peripheral nature. At the same time, however, space here is represented not as an a priori category; rather it is constructed by the gestures,

actions, songs, and linguistic practices, indeed the performances, of those who inhabit them. These zones are then turned into malleable areas of an identity operation undertaken by beings that ultimately seize the walls that separate them from their fellow citizens and expose their loopholes and their oppressive nature.

In analyzing Piñero's repeated featuring of dwellings, I am situating him within a broad Puerto Rican continuum in which certain overarching tropes and preoccupations persist in migrant creations and whose transformations represent specific sociological trends. The shelter is a connecting trope that complements the work in theatre that Alberto Sandoval has done on the family theme concerned with Puerto Rican migration. According to Sandoval, "the institution of the Puerto Rican family deviates, decenters, modifies, and transforms itself once it is placed in the United States, in the crossing between here and there, between the present and the past, between rural and urban settings..." (My translation; 347). Sandoval significantly studies not only Nuyoric plays such as Piñero's *Short Eyes* and Edward Gallardo's *Simpson Street* (1975), but also pieces written by canonical Puerto Rican authors such as René Marqués' *La carreta* (1951) and Manuel Méndez Ballester's *Encrucijada* (1958). The shelter has also been studied within the realm of island literature as an embodiment of the literary canon and traditional cultural values such as patriarchy and eurocentrism. Toward the middle of the last century, as Juan Gelpí shows in *Literatura y paternalismo* (1994), this canon reached a state of decay and was disarticulated by the metaphoric act of dismantling the patriarchal house: "This domestic house that finds itself in ruins corresponds here also to an edifice – paternalism – which is also breaking down" (My translation; 21). Previously confined subjectivities such as women and homosexuals were thus able to exit the house and interact in a fresh way out in the public realm. But an observation should be made about Gelpí's own disarticulation of the canon: although he includes an author who leaves the island and thus travels far from the paternalistic house, this writer, Manuel Ramos Otero, writes in Spanish and is identified as an island Puerto Rican. One wonders, then, if there remains some kind of binding structure – a canonical building indeed – within Gelpí's interpretive strategy and if that has to do with language choice and with identification as immigrant or the lack thereof.

I would propose Gelpí's very trope, the house, as a way to reincorporate Nuyoric literature into a Puerto Rican continuum. To do this, it is necessary to remember the plurality of meanings and experiences

conveyed by the lodging trope. A prominent one is that of the safe space desperately procured by the migrant as happens in V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961). Within Puerto Rican migration, Juan Flores has studied in *From Bomba to Hip-Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity* (2000) the "casitas" (small wooden houses) built by immigrants from the island in cities such as New York and Chicago. These *casitas* that have surfaced between low income buildings serve as nostalgic renderings of the rural houses that have been left behind on the island and thus enable those who visit them to experience a sense of community with which to heal the wound of marginality and its attendant side effects. But the *casitas* are not fixed structures brought from the island as a way to preserve a traditional family; rather they are constructed as needed. Further, they also highlight a performative element by serving as spaces for music playing, cooking, and meetings attended by different generations of migrants and people originating from different places and racial sectors of the island. Indeed, the *casitas* underscore a theatrical element linking community and performance that adds further relevance to their study. As Flores points out: "Whatever may be going on at any given moment, the whole scene – casita, garden, *batey*, farm animals, outhouse, people milling and playing – is like a moveable stage, an array of theatrical props that can be readily packed up and reassembled in some other place and time" (73). Moreover, these living stages not only serve as a very productive way to link space, performance, and identity; they also enable us to look at the cultural developments of Puerto Rican immigrants in an intimate relationship with the culture produced on the island.

This approach joins a recent pattern within cultural analysis of migration. Most notably, in *Puerto Rican Nation on the Move: Identities on the Island and in the United States* (2002), Jorge Duany views Puerto Rican culture as a broad process of identity formation ranging from the images of the island's inhabitants imposed by North American bureaucrats after 1898 to the mobile assembling of a communal identity conducted by Puerto Rican migrants as they left and during the initial stages of their diaspora. Duany's work is a notable example because he is able to see Puerto Rican culture in a way that does not exclude migration. Citing the circularity of Puerto Rican migration, he underlines the performed continuity between the experience of migrants on the island and their lives away from it: "The circular flow between Puerto Rico and the United States challenges conventional views of population movements as linear and irreversible forms of mobility, as permanently disconnected from their sending communities, or as prone to

inevitable assimilation into the host societies” (213). If, according to traditional views, previously migrants extricated themselves from the island upon leaving, now their culture is seen as a development that is intimately related to island identity.

Miguel Piñero’s initial literary production, *Short Eyes* is not only a play in which he experimented with theatrical conventions in order to find a distinct style, but it is also the work that garnered him the most praise from the critics. Piñero wrote it while serving a prison sentence in the New York City Sing Sing Correctional Facility, in 1972, and it was first staged in 1973 by The Family, a group composed primarily of former inmates and directed by theatre workshop facilitator Marvin Camillo. By 1974 it had earned Piñero a New York Drama Critics award for the best American play of the 1973-1974 season. Echoing the place where it was written, this play reflects the inner-workings of a sector of human society whose viciousness is in large measure caused by the oppressive nature of the penal system. The action concerns the arrival of a middle-class Anglo man, Clark Davis, who has been wrongly detained for child molestation. His jail-mates, though clearly divided along racial lines, gang up and kill him. Amid the tragic violence, there emerges a character, Juan Otero, who listens to Clark, gleans his apparent innocence and unsuccessfully attempts to save him from the other inmates.

The tragic events of the play seem to be caused by the rigid way in which characters are divided within the inmate society. In that sense, the relationship between identity and theatrical space is one in which, as Charles Lyons has pointed out when talking about the dramatic characters, individuals “think of themselves in the world,” as they find a place on stage (34).² Here the jail serves as an arena where a tense interplay between place and identity leads to an isolation that feeds mutual hate. This relationship between isolation and lodging space is reminiscent of Puerto Rican plays such as Francisco Arrivi’s *Vejigantes* (1958), where an Afro-Puerto Rican grandmother is forced to hide in the backroom while her lighter-skinned daughter and mother enjoy the relative freedom and power of the living room in their attempt to lure an Anglo-American into marrying the younger offspring. One may also recall René Marqués’ *Los soles truncos* (1958), where the two daughters of a German and Puerto Rican couple shelter themselves from a cultural and economic encroachment by clinging desperately to their Old San Juan house. In both of these cases, lodging serves as a stratifying and insulating space.³

In *Short Eyes* this isolation is more specifically linked to the marginality that marks the migrant experience of Puerto Rican characters. The jail is subdivided tightly into compartments determined by the characters' racial identification. Longshoe, an Anglo heroin addict, significantly serves as purveyor of this racial segregation: "Look here, this is our section ... white ... dig? That's the Rican table, you can sit there if they give you permission ... Same goes for the black section" (26). As Longshoe's statements imply, this spatial manifestation of racial hierarchies is linguistically and ideologically mediated, and throughout the play characters take neatly defined places by means of statements laden with racial terms.⁴ The neatness of these places echoes the rigidity of the stage divisions. El Rahim, an African American member of the Nation of Islam, unflinchingly stays within the boundaries of his creed in stereotypical declarations, such as in his address to Longshoe: "But you are deliberately acting and thinking out of your nature ... thinking like the white devil, Yacoub. Your presence infects the minds of my people like fever (18). Similarly, Longshoe claims his place in a questionable display of power actually qualified by the fact that it is negotiated tensely with inmates from other racial groups: "I am the Don Gee here. You know what that means, right? Good ... Niggers and the spics don't give us honkies much trouble. We're cool half ass" (26-27). Longshoe might rule here, but it is only because he accommodates himself into his role as "honky," one which is assigned to him by other groups represented in the jail. In a revealing turn of events, the only character who aims to leave the confines of his assigned identity is Juan, and when he does so, he is put in his place by his fellow Puerto Rican Paco: "Dónde está la Mancha? ... Or did Sancho go to another floor?" (45). Juan has behaved idealistically by showing a concern for Clark's safety and thus has prompted Paco's memory of Cervantes' Don Quijote. Consequently, Paco's reference to the disappearance of Don Quijote's sidekick Sancho Panza alludes to Juan's lack of realism. More importantly, Paco uses Spanish, the language he shares with Juan, to yank him back not only to realism, but also to the proper racial and cultural allegiance. Indeed, Juan has ventured into the uncharted territory of a foreign identity, and he has to be called back to safer grounds.

Day in and day out, these inmates play their roles repeatedly. Their utterance of slogans stereotypically associated with their ethnic groups seems like the headcount imposed on inmates every time they leave and reenter their cells. El Raheem complains about "Yacoub"; Omar, another African-American inmate issues the proverbial Nation of Islam motto "Salaam

Alaikum”; Longshoe protests “Free the Watergate 500”; and Juan links himself to the Stateside Puerto Rican Young Lords by means of their battle cry “Pa’lante” (10). The repetitious nature of this action of assuming an assigned social and racial place recalls the iterative quality of identity performance which Judith Butler has explored in *Bodies that Matter* (1993). Repetition not only ensures the continuity of an identity system, but it also makes room for new performances of roles that can then be questioned.⁵ Consequently, the link between performativity and identity points out the possibility of interrogating the limitations of roles by means of their repeated performance. And, returning to the issue of space, one wonders then if individuals here participate in the continued creation of the very partitions that confine them and if their iterative performance serves to undermine the fixity of their places. In that regard, one can read the different identity locations here the way Joseph Roach reads the city of New Orleans in *Cities of the Dead* (1996). Remembering African-American participation within Mardi Gras, Roach explores the process of unearthing historical and contemporary racial hierarchies that can be undertaken by means of current performances: “Traditional gestures and masked excesses activate the spatial logic of a city built to make certain powers and privileges not only visible but perpetually reproducible. The crowded spaces become a performance machine for celebrating the occult origin of their exclusion” (14). By performing, citizens are able to show the specific places they occupy in this society and thus invert the spatial operation of the very system that oppresses them. But, more revealingly, they show that they can participate in the definition of the city and that their places in society are not then set in stone.

The repeated execution of roles is accompanied in the play by activities that can be defined more traditionally as performing arts. In these, individuals become actors who, by playing new roles, stress their ability to refashion their identities and to recreate their jail as a more malleable artistic stage. More specifically, the citation of Afro-Caribbean musical genres and Hip-Hop redefines the inmate society in a carnivalesque way that places Puerto Rican characters in authoritative roles. Julio Mercado, also known in the play as Cupcakes, overcomes his weakness of being excessively young compared to the other characters by becoming a fictional disk jockey. In advertising a concert by a band consisting of inmates, Julio hands out the traditionally starring percussionist roles to his fellow Puerto Ricans. Paco becomes Paco Pasqual on congas and Juan becomes Juan Bobo Otero on timbales, in apparent reference to noted mambo and Latin Jazz timbalero

Willie “Bobo” Correa. On the other hand, other characters are ridiculed by being assigned either instruments that imply homosexual acts or roles that are decorative or feminine. Longshoe plays “mouth organ,” while African Americans Iceman, Omar, and El Raheem are dancers in the announced event (23). This implicitly authorizing self-transformation that Tricia Rose has linked to Hip-Hop carries over into the verses rapped by Julio, who gets bragging rights for fooling his fellow inmates: “I was cool ... You people are the fools ... cream of the top ... Cause I got you to say something as stupid as mambo tu le pop” (24).⁶ His verses, however, narrate the story of his arrest for drug possession, and he remembers being detained despite having disposed of his illegal substances by flushing them or ingesting them. In that regard, his rapping serves the purpose of reflecting on the unfairness of the justice system that has penalized him. Thus in his story he is clearly powerless; in his performance, on the other hand, he has managed to turn things around by redrawing the contours of his most immediate society.

Repetition and performativity point at the increasingly porous nature of the walls of and within this jail. Although intending to demonize the excessive realism in the play, New York Times critic Walter Herr underscores the way this play incites the exploration limits between divided worlds: “The line between life and theatre is a notoriously narrow one; I don’t think I have ever seen it crossed so subtly and so frequently, in some ways so frighteningly, as it was in the preview of *Short Eyes* that I attended” (D 1). Herr finds an overwhelming appeal to real-life feelings experienced by an audience that seems clearly divided into African-American and Puerto Rican ex-inmates or potential inmates like El Raheem and Juan and respectable middle-class Anglo-Saxons like Clark. They become so involved in the play that they start acting like their theatrical representations, the first group cheering and the second one looking the other way when violence takes place. The critic’s review actually misses the point that by questioning the border between the stage and the audience, as Austin Quigley has observed when talking about this type of meta-theatrical maneuver, the play is actually inviting the spectator to interrogate divisions between separate worlds.⁷ Here the act of crossing the fourth wall highlights the borders between the racial and social worlds manifest in the audience and in the play itself.

Despite the overwhelming determinism with which characters are defined by cultural and racial spaces in *Short Eyes*, individuals show an awareness of the walls dividing them and point at ways in which they can be transgressed. These forms of border crossing feature the manipulation of language, which

they utilize to redefine their own self-identification. In several instances, Anglo and Afro-American characters employ Spanish and thus question the otherwise neat division between English-speaking non-Latino and bilingual Latino characters. Although Longshoe later reverts to his stereotypical hateful dismissal of his Puerto Rican fellow inmates, he uses their language to defend Clark from an appraisal as a potential victim of sexual aggression: "Back ... back ... boy ... no está bueno ... anyway, no mucho ... como Cupcake" (25). Likewise, in an exchange punctuated by typical expressions of loyalty to racial ideologies, African American Ice follows an understandable "Say it loud" with an unexpected "Vaya!" that would have been uttered more comprehensibly by the Puerto Rican inmates (26). These two characters might stay in their racial quarters during the rest of the play, but they show here that, by virtue of their shared confinement, they have developed a knowledge of other cultures that they incorporate into their own ideological practices and self-representations.

The highest point of the crossing over into the terrain of the other that takes place in the play occurs in Julio's relationship with Clark. Julio engages in several conversations with him, gains an understanding of his potential innocence, and, more importantly, breaks his initial apathy toward Clark's plight. At the beginning of their interaction, Juan sees Clark's case as a lost one and has no inclination to help him. When Juan hears Clark ask God for help, he replies "Cause man won't;" later Juan sees his interlocutor's discourse as a routine confession to a detached listener: "Listen to you? It's up to you ... ? You got a half hour before the floor locks out unless you wanna go public like A.A." (33). As their conversation progresses, however, Juan recognizes that, with the knowledge he has about Clark's innocence, he would be held accountable for not intervening in his defense against the other inmates. This makes him question his own humanity: "Don't try to leap me up ... cause I don't know how much of a human being I would be if I let you make the catwalk" (87). Already involved in Clark's defense, he attempts unsuccessfully to keep the other inmates from killing him, and, despite his failure, his final lamentations underscore the awareness he has attained about the impossibility of living mentally and existentially separate from others in such tight confinement. In conversing with Julio, who is about to be released and who has participated in Clark's assassination, Juan points out how the young man's illusion of being away from the other man's plight actually strengthens the divisive nature of the social structure in and outside the jail: "... cuz you're leaving this place ... and only becuz of that, I can't give you

no life-style pearls ... becuz you, like the rest of us ... became a part of the walls ... an extra bar in the gate ... to remain a number for the rest of your life in the street world" (120). Unlike Julio, Juan is able to seize the space he shared with Clark as a way to explore the specifics of his case and thus he avoids being involved in the other character's assassination. This posits a very different kind of attitude toward confinement and toward walls from that which Puerto Rican authors such as Pedreira and Marqués posited in their variations of the notion of *insularismo*. If they embraced the walls of the house and the borders of the island as a defensive strategy against the other, the bars of the jail are cherished by Piñero's Juan because they keep him from tragically escaping the other and because indeed they create a necessary room for communication.

Compared to *Short Eyes*, Piñero's *Outrageous One-Act Plays* display a stronger emphasis on how space manifests identity processes increasingly marked by performance-based improvisations and questionings of fixity. Like *Short Eyes*, these plays are bound by a spatial metastructure that confines and determines identities almost completely. The slum apartment building that appears explicitly in "Tap Dancing and Bruce Lee Kicks" serves as an organizing grid for the entire group of plays. That is, this building is inhabited by a group of characters who know about and meet each other and at times even appear in other plays in the tome. The building also underscores the hierarchical manner in which cities in general – to which New York City is no exception here – are organized spatially in social class and racial sectors; it further highlights the role of cities' back ways, street corners, and subway stations and bathrooms as spaces for tense and unavoidable encounters and for a performed response to marginality. One way or another, these plays take place in this building, in a setting anecdotally connected to it, or in one that is a variation of it. In "Cold beer," an author in L.A. enacts the writing process amid chance meetings with random strangers and neighbors that feed his creative juices. "Paper toilet" concerns the encounter between two young thieves, an old female whose purse they have stolen, and an unsuspecting middle class white man in a subway bathroom. "The Gun Tower" encompasses a conversation between an African American and a New York Puerto Rican who meet as one ends his shift and the other one begins his own as guards in charge of a prison's gun tower. In "Irving," a young Jewish homosexual hosts a family dinner in which he tells his parents and siblings about his relationship with his sister's African American boyfriend. "Sideshow" features a play staged by a group of young hustlers, drug addicts

and prostitutes who reenact the stabbing death of a juvenile inmate whom other characters believe has told authorities of his rape. In the last play, "Tap Dancing and Bruce Lee Kicks," the writer who has initially appeared in "Cold beer" resurfaces as he struggles to get out of New York by writing and selling heroin paraphernalia in a building in which he has to interact with a homosexual couple and a pair of heroin addicts who run a shooting gallery.

As happens in *Short Eyes*, in *Outrageous One-Act plays* identities have determined places in a socially and racially tainted space, and here the building highlights the hierarchies in which identities are placed. At the bottom of the greater vertical building of the city, there is a smaller structure for marginalized immigrants. The stage directions in "Tap Dancing and Bruce Lee Kicks" define this place:

An Apartment in any of America's large inner city tenement buildings sheltering second, third and fourth generations of families who sailed onto these shores in search for the American Dream. These are the men and women that took sleeping pills hoping that they could, would and should have achieved the goal that they all set out for, but they overslept. (145).

This location is characterized not only by the social ills that presumably affect its inhabitants, but more importantly, by the immobility of its tenants, who, despite paradoxically having arrived there in an attempt to moving into another economic level, are doomed to stay here generation upon generation.

But confinement is not reserved here for immigrants or for ethnic minorities; as we saw in *Short Eyes*, even white middle-class individuals can easily end up caged. In "Irving" confinement combines economic and sexual orientation-based marginalization. A young eponymous Jewish man has to live in a working class neighborhood due to his rejection of his family's financial success-driven ethics; he is also confined in the closet of his undisclosed homosexuality. His response is spatially revealing: he invites his family to his home explicitly so that he can come out of the closet, but at the same time, implicitly, so that they experience his spatial and existential limitations. As a byproduct of the entrance into his abode, they have to deal with the violence that takes place in the neighborhood, something that Butch, Irving's previously secret African-American boyfriend, has to train them deal with. When Uncle Al refuses to duck in order to avoid gunshots that are being fired, Butch admonishes them: "That is up to you, my man, but where I come from, when you hear shots, you duck and pray the cop isn't shooting in your direction"

(101). Irving's case then reiterates the constant possibility of some kind of reclusion that every citizen can encounter. Further, it creates a situation in which this imprisonment has to be shared even by those who least consider themselves bound by it. Moreover, the author in "Tap Dancing and Bruce Lee Kicks," Mike Poor writes a story whose protagonist, David Dancer, muses about his inability to escape the events taking place around his Harlem residence:

Billy Joel's voice declared war on the silences in the single rented room that sheltered David Dancer's factory-tired body during those hours that did not require him to breath the indecency of those alien fumes. The radio blared out Joel's song. The sound was a total contrast to the belching buses creeping outside of David's window. David wished he had it inside to capture all the sounds that invaded his privacy. They painted a picture that only Michelangelo could create: the comedy of young kids playing, the roar of souped-up cars, the exploding booms of fathers and mothers over their children's sloppiness and dirt catching magnetism. (151)

David, a non-descript factory worker, is forced by his environment to define himself in dialogue with myriad sounds and utterances populating his external atmosphere. His apartment is peripheral to the more affluent elements of the city, but at the same time it is right at the heart of a shared space which forces him to assert himself against infinite interpellations.

The building, by virtue of its collective general entrances, exits, and hallways, as well as the thinness of its walls and windows, poses ways in which interaction becomes an inescapable reality. In "Tap Dancing and Bruce Lee Kicks," Mike Poor and the other characters, like David Dancer himself, have to contend with neighbors and sounds that make privacy and safety an illusion. María, a transvestite, and her live-in partner Julio, have to respond to the super's screams while they are arguing among themselves. Likewise, Mike has to cope with customers who want to buy his paraphernalia and who are "knocking at the door at all odd hours of the day, even when we are taking care of biological affairs" (152). Like the building, the city is fitted with contact zones that force citizens to encounter elements from opposite sectors in tension-riddled situations. Most notably, in "Paper toilet," a bathroom in a subway is a very suggestive setting for this type of encounter as it provides a striking combination of movement (by virtue of the transportation factor) and a public aspect with an element of privacy. In this play, a middle-

class man occupying a somewhat private stall has found himself without toilet paper and thus has to call on other people for help in obtaining a newspaper that he has left in a more public part of the restroom. In doing so, his class-based discourse has to adapt in order for communication with characters from other social classes and ethnic groups to take place. He attempts futilely to get help from two young African-American males who are inspecting a purse they have just stolen: "I couldn't help overhearing about your little, let's say, financial adventure and about the frustrating results. I'd like to engage you in a little business" (17). By accusing him of making homosexual advances and stealing his pants, the young men underline the wide gap that separates their socioeconomic realities and the challenges the latter poses to communication and interaction. In the end, once the young men and their female theft victim are arrested for disturbing the peace, the man ends up facing the consequences of the privacy that he has presumably longed for as part of his social outlook: "Hey, is there anybody out there? This is a man in trouble ... is there anybody out there? ... shit ... shit ..." (34). Once he recognizes his utter helplessness, his disgruntled demeanor betrays his ability to utter the type of language that is more traditionally associated with the individuals he has just encountered. The restroom has forced him to experience what the others face as a most common reality by virtue of the thinness of the doors and walls of his stall.

Parallel to the building's hallways, the city's streets provide an open space that can be transformed into an arena for artistic performances. In "Sideshow" young characters such as two prostitutes, one female and the other male, a couple of drug dealers, a pimp, a female heroin addict, a male glue sniffer and a hustler highlight the simultaneous process of assuming and transforming social roles. In a play that Malo, the hustler, directs, the youths transform their street corner into the juvenile correctional facility where Malo has evidently been detained and they reenact the killing of a young inmate who has informed on others who have raped him. In instructing Clearnose, the glue sniffer, how to play the informer, Malo is both handing out acting advice and training him for a very possible actual rape or death as a result of his current wayward lifestyle: "(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, those kids are trying to fuck me.' (Malo says it in an angry manner)" (124). After learning how to play this character, Clearnose knows better his potential role as victim of social ills that are already affecting him. At the same time, however, Malo's directorial and acting activities are looking back

at a past event from a temporal distance that affords him an implicit reflexive outlook. Furthermore, the very act of repeating the event underlines a performed element from which questioning can arise.

Indeed, reflection takes place in three monologues in which characters look back at the formation of their identities as responses to their marginal circumstances. China, a female prostitute and heroin addict, explains in a poem how heroin came to replace an absent mother figure, soothing her at the same time it made her prostitute herself to feed her addiction. Clearnose sits atop a building aloofly looking at reality as a dreamy cloud that he has concocted by means of his glue. Malo's monologue, in turn, shows how his hustler persona developed as a means to cope with his precarious identity:

. . . and then I got caught in bed with the preacher's wife. .
 . .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 about
 being a dealer once, but like you really don't make no bread.
 . . .As a merchant I only take what they were going to waste
 on beers in some greasy spoon saloon. (130)

In explaining his identity, Malo focuses on how he chose his conman self because it was better than stealing or selling drugs. More importantly, he describes himself from an external vantage point as an artistic character that he devises in a self-conscious way by stressing the virtues of his name and the different stylistic aspects of his identity. By turning the street into a stage and themselves into characters, the youngsters in "Sidekick" make their relationship with space a more malleable one.

As these youths have suggested, in the metabuilding of the city, walls can be altered and turned into conduits through which to access other realities. The entrance into other dimensions is fueled by the need for communication with beings from other social and ethnic sectors. Mike Poor, the author in both "Cold beer" and "Tap Dancing and Bruce Lee Kicks" points at the freeing effect of using the walls for exploring other lives. In "Cold beer" he tells his agent that he has just written a story containing characters that have just visited his house, and in the second play he gleefully proposes writing a play in which he can "peek into other people's lives" (160). In his very experience, his interested peeking offers a liberation from another spatial limitation. As a Latino writer (although he is not defined as such in the plays, he does listen to "Latin music" and his initials and first name are the same as Piñero's), he can move from one coast to the other and violate the traditional

territorial allegiances of Mexicans to the West Coast and of Puerto Ricans to the East Coast. The immigrant territoriality is thus exposed and violated by the act of communication.

One can thus find a continuity between the jail in *Short Eyes* and the building in *Outrageous One-Act Plays*: they both have walls that can be used and transgressed in communicative acts. Further, they are connected by characters who are interested in the circumstances of other marginal beings, as both Juan in the first play and Mike Poor in the second group of plays concern themselves with the penuries of their jail-mates and neighbors respectively. More importantly, they both transcend the fixity of their locations by means of their sideward glances. Moreover, they both echo the desire to remain simultaneously isolated from outside utopias and engaged with his immediate surroundings that Piñero's poetic voice expresses in "A Lower East Side Poem." This overarching preoccupation with a transcendental *insularismo* provides a connection that has to be recognized as an underlying development of a recurring Puerto Rican theme. One wonders if Puerto Rican literature and culture are ready to forget their traditional isolationism and envision the possibility of an engagement with the segment of its population that traveled and was able to see beyond itself. Maybe there is something to be gained from being more accepting and aware of Nuyoric literature.

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Notes

¹ According to Pedreira, due to the island's abandonment by the Spanish metropolis from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries and the frequent attacks by pirates and corsairs, the island population developed an all encompassing defensive isolationism: "The sea belt that creates us and oppresses us gradually closes up to us the universal spectacle and operates in us a narrowing of our vision proportional to our municipal broadening" (My translation; 116). Encroached by a new invader (the United States) Puerto Rico needs a new repositioning of its culture whose development is Pedreira's project. One of the main ills affecting the island during the time reflects the need to defend and protect from the new invader which Pedreira himself has seen as pathological: "If we cannot say that our Hispanic heritage is bankrupt, at least we can affirm that, in terms of spiritual terms, it has ceased to make payments" (148). Although Pedreira indicates the need for an openness to contemporary cultural patterns, statements like this one as well as the general interest that his *Revista Índice* (1927-1929) displayed on Puerto Rican and Spanish cultural icons of colonial times betray an *insularismo* of sorts that is defined by the need to defend an essence from current cultural threats.

² Lyons stresses the use of theatrical space as a physical artifact that holds a “varied aesthetic, political, social, and economic significance,” as an “emblem of political hierarchies,” as “a physical image that can communicate social significance,” or as “a physical presence that can receive meaning from a dramatic character” (34). Characters, in turn, define their place in the world based upon the values represented via the scene in a way that makes their self-identification inextricable from it.

³ Marqués wrote several other plays in which he used living spaces as embodiments of character’s relationship with the world. Although he maintained a conservative approach to contemporary Puerto Rican issues, he did propose metaphoric houses whose walls were significantly more permeable than those in *Los soles truncos*. Two 1964 plays, *Carnaval afuera/Carnaval adentro* (“Carnival Outside/Carnival Inside”) and *La casa sin reloj* (“The House Without a Clock”), feature two such homes. In the first one, a San Juan colonial house has a balcony through which a young painter enters and saves a young woman from being sold to a United States investor. Likewise, the investor’s agent, a Latin American arms dealer, and a Cuban real estate tycoon find an open door policy that enables them to engage in their respective enterprises. In turn, the second play is set in a suburban home where a housewife is saliently prone to entrances such as that of her nationalist brother in law and the FBI agents who are pursuing him. If, on the one hand, there is a noteworthy openness to the walls, doors, and balconies of these abodes, on the other, the disruptive nature of the entrances that take place in these plays implicitly call for an *insularismo*-like guarding of borders and home spaces.

⁴ Beatriz Rizk underlines the role of language in *Short Eyes*: “What is very innovative about the subject treated by Piñero is that it takes place at a linguistic level: his style is evidently taken from the street. The author has an acute ear that captures local expressions that are most laden with irony and dark humor, at the same time he copies the colloquial speech not only of each group but also of the prison itself” (My translation; 147). As I add further in the body of this article, language initially contributes to an identity process in which characters take their specific place in the prison’s social space.

⁵ According to Butler, this repetition of roles and of the norm they imply both constitutes the subject and makes room for its performed questioning: “The ‘performative’ dimension of construction is precisely the forced reiteration of norms. . . .this repetition is what enables the subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject” (90-101). The very repetitive nature of this enforcement of the norm adds layers to the subject’s oppressive identification and at the same time poses the possibility of improvising deviant and subversively mimicked versions of the norm.

⁶ According to Rose, MC’s, DJ’s, graffiti artists, and breakdancers gain an authority that is inaccessible to them in other facets of their lives by assuming identities in their art: “Taking on new names and identities offers ‘privilege from below’ in the face of limited access to legitimate forms of status attainment” (36). The boasting and mocking of rivals that Julio includes in his act are actually two of the most common forms of embracing a powerful self in Hip-Hop.

⁷ In a discussion of theatre that foregrounds divisions between worlds and the their attendant questioning, Quigley sees the glass wall featured in Henry Ibsen’s *Ghosts* as a metaphor for the broader significance of metatheatrical border crossings: “The glass wall gradually becomes an emblem of repeatedly asserted but repeatedly undermined divisions between inner and outer, good and bad, past and present, self and other, and so on” (34). Echoing Butler’s emphasis on iteration, Quigley sees the repeated assertion of these divisions as the basis for the metatheatrical exploration of borders between social, moral, and cultural worlds outside the theatre.

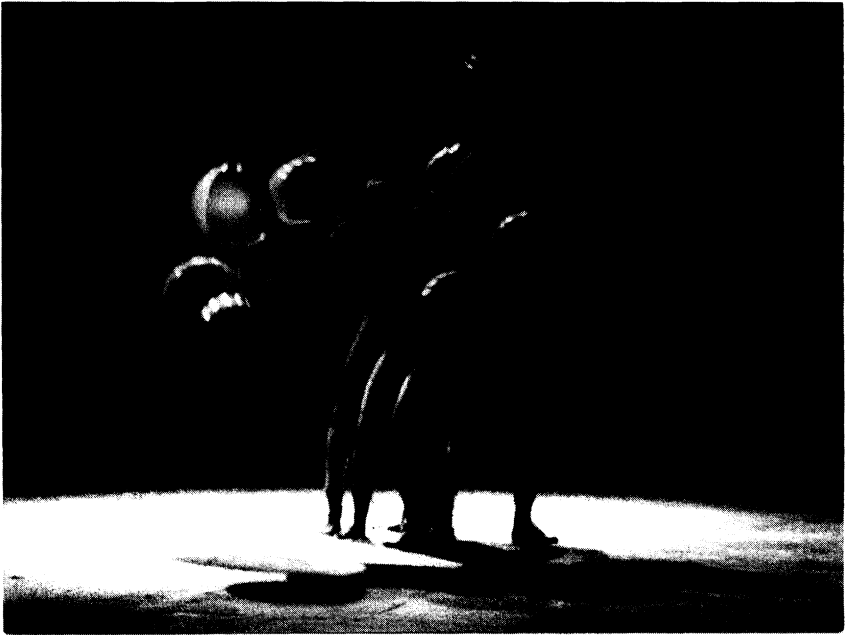
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Un elefante ocupa mucho espacio

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