

## What Scattered Ashes Leave behind:

### Expressions of Nuyorican Identity in Miguel Piñero's *A Lower East Side Poem*

#### CE QUE LES CENDRES DISPERSÉES LAISSENT EN ARRIÈRE:

#### LES EXPRESSIONS DE L'IDENTITÉ NUJORICANE DANS LE POÈME DE LOWER EAST SIDE DE MIGUEL PIÑERO

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**Abstract:** Miguel Piñero's (1985) *A Lower East Side Poem* offers social and spatial critique of New York City's Lower East Side and the corruption and neocolonialism that made it a contested domain in the 1970s and 80s. In so doing, the poem functions as Piñero's last will and testament and description of how the urban landscape of The Lower East side was ground for reshaping Nuyorican identity. This essay takes *A Lower East Side Poem* as a starting point for understanding Nuyorican identity as a dynamic expression of vernacular cosmopolitan and indigenous concerns using rich rhetorical representations.

**Key words:** Nuyorican; Rhetoric; Miguel Pinero; Puerto Rico; Identity; Vernacular Cosmopolitanism; Indigeneity

**Resumé:** Le poème de Lower East Side de Miguel Piñero (1985) offre une critique sociale et spatiale sur le Lower East Side de la cité de New York et sur la corruption et le néocolonialisme qui l'ont transformée en un domaine contesté dans les années 1970 et 80. Cela faisant, le poème fonctionne comme le dernier souhait et le testament de Piñero et la description de la façon dont le paysage urbain du Lower East Side a été broyé pour remodeler l'identité Nuyoricane. Cet essai considère Le Poème de Lower East Side comme le point de départ pour comprendre l'identité Nuyoricane comme une expression dynamique de quiétudes vernaculaires cosmopolitaines et indigènes en utilisant des représentation rhétoriques riches

**Mots-clés:** Nuyorican; Rhétorique; Miguel Piñero; Puerto Rico; Identité; Cosmopolitanisme Vernaculaire; Indigénéité

## INTRODUCTION

With the recent confirmation of Judge Sonia Sotomayor to the United States Supreme Court, Nuyorican identity has seen a serious and mainstream revival (Dawkins, 2011). No longer is the term synonymous merely with Jennifer Lopez's

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buttocks or block, or the stereotypical staple of rice and beans. Rather, the term has taken on a new cosmopolitan prominence and at the same time returned its indigenous roots. One way to better understand Nuyoricans' newfound prominence and roots is to examine the pressures and concerns inherent in Miguel Piñero's (1985) *A Lower East Side Poem*, also known as a Nuyorican manifesto. The poem not only holds a prominent place in the Nuyorican canon, but also represents a starting point for constructing Nuyorican identity as an articulation of vernacular cosmopolitan and indigenous concerns using rich rhetorical representations.

In this essay I explore Nuyorican identity as represented in Miguel Piñero's *A Lower East Side Poem*. First, I present a brief biographical account of the author's life. Second, I present Piñero's perspective of Nuyorican identity as a mixture of vernacular cosmopolitanism and indigenous politics. Third, I explore *A Lower East Side Poem* as a Nuyorican last will and testament—defining ethnic identity, physical space, the law or code of the streets, and issues of justice and injustice—that traces the continuity of life and community even as they were fading away. I conclude by asserting that critical attention to this Nuyorican poem adds dimension to the ongoing social relations between indigenous peoples and state formations and offers opportunities for attending to the material conditions and structural inequalities that shape the identities of its authors.

## MEETING MIGUEL PIÑERO

The author and subject of *A Lower East Side Poem* is Miguel Gomez Piñero (a.k.a. Miky), playwright, *poeta*, actor, criminal and co-creator of the Nuyorican Poets Café (Nuyorican Poet's Café, n.d.). Piñero was born in Gurabo, Puerto Rico on 19 December 1946. His Nuyorican journey began when he immigrated to New York with his family in the 1950s. There he developed a love for literature and a love for street life—especially stealing, drug use, and transgressive sexual behavior (Shewey, 2001). In 1972 at the age of 25 Piñero was incarcerated in The Ossining Correctional Facility (Sing Sing) for second-degree robbery. While imprisoned he read and was influenced by the work of Jack Kerouac, Amiri Baraka, the Last Poets, Gil Scott-Heron, and Felipe Luciano. Piñero wrote much of his poetry and plays while incarcerated. The most notable of the latter is *Short Eyes*, which won a *Village Voice* Obie Award, the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, was nominated for six Tony Awards in 1974 and was later adapted for film (Bennets, 1988). His other major dramatic works include *A Midnight Moon at the Greasy Spoon*, *Straight From the Ghetto*, *Eulogy for a Small-Time Thief* and *Every Form of Refuge Has Its Price*.<sup>2</sup> On the heels of Piñero's critical acclaim William Morrow published an edited anthology entitled *Nuyorican Poetry* in 1975. Piñero later appeared in and wrote for television shows, including *Miami Vice*, *Baretta*, and *Kojak*. Perhaps his most famous poem, *A Lower East Side Poem*, appeared in his 1985 solo poetic collection *La Bodega Sold Dreams*.

Although Piñero was one of the first Nuyorican artists recognized by United States mainstream literary culture he fully embodied the personae of street-smart outlaw and idealistic Lower East Side Everyman, of hustler and activist (Gussow, 1988). As such Piñero's art and life were intimately intertwined and oriented toward a vernacular cosmopolitan perspective that found beauty in the hideous. Boldly displaying his own sins, he populated his work with a community of sinners: pimps, prostitutes, drug addicts, thieves, pedophiles, lepers, gang members, and other so-called inner city dwellers, delinquents, and untouchables. These characters lived and died by the codes of the streets, codes that do "not respect the law and reject nominal membership in the dominant national culture" (Brown, 2002:2). Piñero's themes revolved around the value clashes and moral conflicts found in prison and street life and the struggle to define an individual identity while maintaining in-group authenticity and proximity to the geographical and social locations that constructed his identity. Consequently, his work expresses two kinds of cosmopolitans: the empowered and the disempowered, those who have chosen to live with others in different countries and who have become successful, and those who have been forced to live with others in different countries or in different social locations such as prisons (Werbner 2006; Beck & Sznajder, 2006).

Piñero's personal politics of disempowered cosmopolitanism present a challenge to much of his prolific professional activity and its reception within empowered cosmopolitan circles. "Everyone you meet who knew Piñero got pleasantly ripped off or hustled or enchanted or taught a lesson about the street" (Shewey, 2001). He was a hustler who "from prison cell emerged self-taught... (and) again returned to (his) barrio upbringing for inspiration" (Kanellos, 2002, p. 10). However, it can be argued that the places from which he wrote—*el barrio* and prison—are not ones of sustained authentic expression. This is because his financial and literary success removed him from the immediate marginal experiences of many New York Puerto Ricans, whom he and others dubbed Nuyoricans. His attempts to reintegrate himself into this marginalized environment can be considered at odds with his newfound fame and fortune upon release from prison. It can be argued that he consciously chose to squander whatever wealth he created to regain and sustain a ghetto world that was

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<sup>2</sup> Several of Piñero's dramas are referenced intertextually in *A Lower East Side Poem*. For instance, "A dweller of prison time" references *Short Eyes*, "greasy spoons" references *A Midnight Moon at the Greasy Spoon*, "thief, junkie" references *Eulogy of a Small Time Thief*, "concrete tomb" references *Straight from the Ghetto*.

lost to him and that this constitutes exploitation rather than a search for inspiration. What is more, his poetry explains that many oppressed individuals fail to recognize their own confusion, their own complicity in the processes that ultimately oppress them. In this way his poetry mirrored the ambiguity and ambivalence of his life experiences, which challenge audiences to accept the burden of proof and decide for themselves whether his rhetoric represents an empowered or disempowered version of cosmopolitanism or something else.

Those who interpret Piñero's work as expressive of a disempowered cosmopolitanism see it as an attempt to avoid mainstream liberal tokenism that would transform him into an advertisement for an unachievable American Dream. According to this counter-statement Piñero

belongs to a tradition, a tradition of artists, whose devious and renegade lives paradoxically result in the most painstaking devotion to the truth and to the rigor of their craft...If the life of our author seems elusive and troubling, one can only applaud what is so candidly engaged here by his art; where nothing is stolen or borrowed a great deal is revealed...And in this sense he is as blessed and as straight a writer as they come (Yanover & Ichaso, 2002).

Piñero's brand of cosmopolitanism is neither strictly empowered nor disempowered. Instead Piñero expresses what Bhabha (2001) refers to as a vernacular cosmopolitanism: a reflexive stance of openness and a dialogic formation understood as countercultural. Piñero commits to a vernacular cosmopolitan sense of community, understands the intersections between self and others that together constituted his identity as Nuyorican, and uses Nuyorican outlaws in his writing to stage a countercultural ethical code.

## **NUYORICAN IDENTITY**

Born out of tensions between Puerto Rican and United States nationalities, myths, languages, and racial associations, Piñero's work represents vernacular cosmopolitanism (Fahey, 2001). The communal aspects of vernacular cosmopolitanism are encapsulated in the identifier "Nuyorican." Nuyorican—signifying an aesthetic, rhetorical, and social movement—represents a means by which New York Puerto Ricans etched their own physical and linguistic home space or nation within and between the dominant cultures of the United States and Puerto Rico (Brown, 1998). Algarín (1994) provides an etymological definition of the term:

1. Originally Puerto Rican epithet for those of Puerto Rican heritage born in New York: their Spanish was different (Spanglish), their way of dress and look were different. They were stateless people (like US poets) until the Cafe became their homeland.
2. After Algarín and Piñero, a proud poet speaking New York Puerto Rican.
3. A denizen of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe.
4. New York's riches (p. 5).

For Piñero, Nuyorican identity represents a personal struggle with irrelevance and a communal breakthrough into cultural and literary prominence. Thus, according to Piñero, Nuyorican is not to be conceptualized as corruption of the English and Spanish languages or as fixed identity easily definable within black-white racial limits. Rather, it is an identity meant for those who "claim pride in being Puerto Rican but who acknowledge their New York Soul" (Rodriguez, 1996, p. 33-34). Hence, the Spanglish spelling: it is Nuyorican and not New-Yor-Rican.

Implied...is an acceptance of a non-white ghetto status, with all its positive and negative consequences. For Puerto Ricans (of low socioeconomic status) this is the start of a new, self-defined position—an attempt to remain a unified whole and evolve from (their) own roots, between blacks and whites (p. 33-34).

Nuyorican identity is about languages, people, and the relationships between a people indigenous to New York via Puerto Rico and larger state formations.

Nuyorican notions of community and identity also engage what Maaka and Fleras (2005) refer to as "the politics of indigeneity." The politics of indigeneity are evident in the ways in which Nuyoricans think about the terms of their belonging to a wider polity and their status as unique people, belonging not just to one or more national jurisdictions, but to their own communities. A politicized Nuyorican indigenous perspective, when coupled with the countercultural ethical code inherent in vernacular cosmopolitanism, rejects mainstream mediated representations that treat the Puerto Rican population as a monolith and render it far from the ideal of the model minority (Rodriguez, 1990). Instead of allowing Nuyorican collective identity to be stereotyped as the "spic:" dirty, lazy, criminal, junkie, fiery and overtly sexual, Nuyorican indigeneity, uses the linguistic technique of symbolic reversal to fight the "spic" with the "spic" (Duany, 2002). Attributes of the "spic" are redeployed in hopes of a Marxist-styled consciousness-raising or demystification.

By animating what I call "spictacular" figures and settings—specifically the junkie, *el barrio* (neighborhood) and *la bodega* (corner store)—Nuyorican authors like Piñero demonstrate how oppressed groups become addicted to the images of the American Dream sold by the media and by a capitalistic superstructure. Nuyorican consumers line up to get their

pieces of the American Dream, only to find themselves herded like so much cattle into “unemployment lines, welfare lines, and the lines of junkies...and street criminals that populate urban marginality” (Kanellos, 2002, p. 10). Nuyorican expression mixes vernacular cosmopolitanism and the politics of indigeneity to critique aspirational consumption that ignores actual economic concerns.

Consistent with the Frankfurt School’s notion of the media as manipulative... (Nuyorican literature) attack(s)...the media’s ability to promote ‘false consciousness...’ (It)...is an attempt to help Puerto Ricans ‘kick’ the consumerist ‘habit’ through the use of an aggressive, violent, caustic humor; to help them withdraw from the false images of America and of themselves produced by the media to a space of freedom outside (Cruz-Malavé, 1998, p. 47).

Nuyorican identity emerges as a combative discourse engaged in ideological and countercultural critique, a complex intersection of ideas, strategies, and realities that engenders coalition as well as personal reflection.

Recent scholarship describes Nuyorican identity as one of manifold centers and explains how Nuyoricans have literally written themselves into history by wrestling publicly with their complex and oscillating identities (Flores, 2000; Sanchez-Gonzalez, 2001; Rebollo-Gil 2004; Anselm & Rubal-Lopez, 2005; Otero, 2008; Bernard-Carreño, 2010). Nuyorican identity crises amplify the concerns of indigeneity and vernacular cosmopolitanism. In particular, Nuyorican identity is

aware of the limitations of any one culture or any one identity and is radically aware of its insufficiency in governing a wider society, but... nevertheless is not prepared to rescind its claim to the traces of difference, which make its life important (Hall, 2002, p. 30).

On a macroscopic level there is the struggle between nation and representation, or presence, of Nuyoricans within New York-United States and Puerto Rican literatures, cultures, and nations (Villanueva, 2005). On a microscopic level there is the author’s personal struggle between the competing persuasive forces of the will to live and the call of death. Poetry is the tool Piñero uses to create a lasting image of himself, *el barrio*, and Nuyorican identity as an intercultural mixture of vernacular cosmopolitanism and indigenous politics (Apparicio, 1994).

Naturally, New York City’s Lower East Side, Loisaida, deserves mention as an important part of Piñero’s immediate historical-cultural context and contributing factor to the indigeneity represented in his writing. It was a predominantly working-class area, whose streets are among the most historically-laden in all of New York. In the mid-1800s the area’s population was predominantly Irish and German. They were followed between 1870 and 1930 by Italians, Jewish, Polish, Romanians, Chinese, and Ukrainians who came to work in the garment industry. After World War II, Puerto Ricans and African Americans moved into the area. This neighborhood full of overlapping cultures was seen as a den of corruption, sin, and lawlessness by uptown bourgeoisie (Brown, 2002). The perspective became more negative as the neighborhood claimed more Puerto Rican inhabitants of low socioeconomic status. Consequently, Nuyorican poets described the area itself as the exigency for Nuyorican poetry (López, 2005).

Mele (2000) explains that the migration of Puerto Ricans to the area was part of a deliberate gerrymandering strategy, with the Puerto Rican residents of the projects along Avenue D relocated by fiat. “Urban renewal projects, nicknamed ‘Puerto Rican Removal Plans,’ forcibly relocated thousands of Puerto Rican families from one poor neighborhood to another” (p. 56). López (2005) describes the area as a “tragic center” for Puerto Ricans, where Nuyoricans have not so much “staked their claim” but are trapped by “walls that keep them inside” (p. 208). While a few riots and demonstrations protesting the gentrification of the area occurred in the post-1960s era, the area is without effective tools for combating the daunting duo of political and property interests. “Private urban development is presented as a more desirable and ‘practical’ solution to urban social ills than government policies such as low-income housing subsidies or welfare programs” (Mele, 2000:56). These social, economic, and political forces—of immigration, poverty, housing problems, crime, and Regan Era laissez-faire politics—are part of Piñero’s Nuyorican identity.

In his poetry Piñero renders Nuyoricans’ unique identities as immigrant-citizens in search of a home. Nuyoricans are American citizens who exist somewhere between Puerto Rico and the United States. Hence, they are both present and absent from each culture (Apparicio, 1998). Though most Nuyoricans remain physically mobile between the two places and committed to specific social, political, and economic concerns in both places Piñero refuses to fully assimilate into either of these milieus (Duany, 2002). As will be discussed in the next section of this essay, *A Lower East Side Poem* explains that Piñero wants to stay in the Lower East Side *barrio* as a way to avoid either Puerto Rican or United States assimilation. Piñero’s form emphasizes Nuyorican identity’s countercultural ideology and multilingual language, slang, irregular poetic meter, and fluidity within a bounded space, culture, and time (Cruz-Malavé, 1998). The Lower East Side becomes an indigenous frame for a new identity formation that refuses to accept racial (black/white) or national (Puerto Rico/United States) or gendered (*machista/feminista*) binaries while containing traces of each. Piñero translates existing spaces, peoples, cultures, and languages into something new he and others imagine as Nuyorican through the vehicle of his own life and death. His poetry combines vernacular cosmopolitanism and the politics of indigeneity as it offers an

image of the author whose fate mirrors the fate of the Nuyorican community which was also facing its own extinction in the late 1980s.

## UNDERSTANDING A LOWER EAST SIDE POEM

*A Lower East Side Poem* is a starting point for a Nuyorican cultural rhetoric with strong forensic and epideictic qualities. Analysis of specific textual elements—purpose, audience, persona, tone, and thematic structure—allows for a sensitive understanding of the work in its context (Leff, 1992). The meanings and purposes of *A Lower East Side Poem* are illuminated through the individual and collective identity claims made by its author. Piñero writes

so please when I die...  
don't take me far away  
keep me near by  
take my ashes and scatter them thru out  
the Lower East Side... (1985, p. 7).

The poem is first and foremost a last will and testament and a forensic petition. It defines Piñero's estate and his survivors. It gives the account of his life. It asks a best friend to arrange a memorial service and makes a burial request. It also celebrates the author and his *barrio* through form and content and, ultimately, action. It thereby allows Nuyorican identity access to the public sphere through expression of a simultaneous presence and absence. As a result the poem is inherently critical. It depicts historical and ongoing tensions between Puerto Rico and the United States in terms of a vernacular cosmopolitanism. It also expresses the indigenous tensions of a Lower East Side urban experience by describing the Lower East Side physically and personally. Audiences are asked to grapple with individual's and community's lives which seem to be slipping away. In this sense the poem constitutes a call to action that marks an ending but also a new beginning, the end of Piñero's life and the beginning of a Nuyorican legacy in cultural memory.<sup>3</sup>

The first line of the poem, "Just once before I die," establishes that Piñero is alive at the time of invention and that he is struggling with his demise. His strategies for doing so constitute the rhetorical work of the poem. He begins by establishing common ground, whereby the Lower East Side and its inhabitants (often considered subhuman and always considered marginal) are humanized in the form of Piñero via personification or *prosopopeia*. He maintains continuity by creating his own image in the audience's collective memory and staging his own memorial service. Memory is employed to create a lasting vision that the audience can cling to so that they can let the actual Piñero "depart" since he "is departing anyway" (Gross, 2004, p. 67). He then translates presence into absence by addressing the past (life lived, living) and future (death at unknown hour) in the present moment. There is no escape to "past or future utopia" (Irizarry, 2004, p. 77). There is only now, only the Lower East Side.

Piñero achieves his purposes by introducing an indigenous theme of *A Lower East Side Poem*—identity as related to physical and cultural geography. Piñero makes this theme explicit in the title. By naming it after New York City's Lower East Side, a neighborhood that is defined and identified simply by its relation to everything else as less than and marginal, Piñero critiques the positive and negative effects of a human-made socially constructed world (Mele, 2000). Optimistically, this is a celebration of neighborhood that inspired his life and art. Pessimistically, this same neighborhood shaped his often criminal and fatalistic behavior. Hence Piñero, a self-proclaimed Nuyorican and Lower East Side Everyman, is defined and described by his relation to others and to his surroundings. He engages a spectacular symbolic reversal when he privileges and celebrates aspects of the Lower East Side that mainstream society labels debased and good-for-nothing. His writing shines a light on the dark elements with which he was familiar and paints a sympathetic commemorative portrait of the Lower East Side.

*A Lower East Side Poem* relies on indigeneity as well as the vernacular cosmopolitanism of the immediate audience, which consists of the Lower East Side Nuyorican community. This audience was in the position to grant or deny his last wishes. Specifically, the poem relies on their shared memories about Piñero and on their shared experiences as Nuyoricans in the Lower East Side. Poets from the Nuyorican Poets' Cafe delivered *A Lower East Side Poem* at the memorial. Algarín's first-hand account delineates an impressive guest list of readers:

That night Amiri Baraka, Pedro Pietri, Jose-Angel Figueroa, Nancy Mercado, Eddie Figueroa, Julio Dalmau, Amina Baraka, Louis Reyes Rivera, Luis Guzman, and many, many other writers, musicians, and friends showed to celebrate the passing of a man who had left a legacy of poetry and theater behind. When a poet dies, a whole community is affected, and the Lower East Side was abuzz with despair (1994, p. 5).

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<sup>3</sup> The poem inspired the reestablishment of New York's now famed Nuyorican Poets Cafe, sparked renewed and continued interest in the author's life and work, and catalyzed the biographical film entitled *Piñero*.

The audience's attitudes and actions were affected as the poem became what it described. The audience experienced commemorative qualities of rhetorical action as they were asked to hold on to Piñero in their memories while they took his "ashes and scatter(ed) them thru out the Lower East Side." The theme of life is stressed over the possibility of death. Hence, the immediate audience shapes the immediate meaning of and reaction to the poem.

In addition to its delivery at the memorial service *A Lower East Side Poem* is included in Piñero's anthology of poetry, *La Bodega Sold Dreams*. This is important for determining multiple audiences addressed. First, the poem addresses Algarín as a best friend's last will and testament. Second, the poem addresses the memorial audience as a plea for commemoration and release. Finally, the poem addresses a broader audience of readers, both academic and popular. These include contemporary Nuyoricans and residents of the Lower East Side, members of other marginalized communities in the United States and abroad, writers and performance artists, and scholars of all types. In this broader context it asks that audiences exercise self-determination, nonconformity and transform intracultural communication into intercultural communication.

Piñero assumes the persona of Lower East Side Everyman in order to reach his audiences and to fulfill his purposes. In each stanza Piñero takes on the role Everyman, of one who has been summoned by death. This poem is his honest account for the life he led, held in the court of the Lower East Side. But this is *not* a morality drama or an apologia. Piñero (1985) shows no remorse for "commit(ing) every known sin" (p. 7). In fact, he presents himself as "the Philosopher of the Criminal Mind," as one who studies the wisdom and law of the outlaw (p. 7). Like Everyman, the Lower East Side Everyman seeks counsel and companionship for his journey. He does this by asking the audience to gather, to listen, and to "scatter" his remains.<sup>4</sup> Unlike the classical Everyman however, Piñero is not damned by the help of other people. It is other people, his audience who disperses his ashes, who also spread his message and share his identity.

In each stanza Piñero takes on the role of one who is alive but who knows he is about to meet his end. He begins,

Just once before I die  
I want to climb up on a  
tenement sky  
to dream my lungs out till  
I cry  
then scatter my ashes through the Lower East Side (p. 7).

By expressing his dying wishes for remembrance and dispersal he acknowledges the authority of the poem to stand as his last will and testament and appeals to the audience to grant his request. Use of the dramatized voice "I" reflects that he wishes his persona to be recognized as such. This is because he seeks to provide an account of his life before he dies, to construct his memory in the audience's minds and to direct the memorial performance. The repeated mentioning of scattering his ashes throughout the Lower East Side at the end of stanzas one, two, three, four, six, and seven, reminds the audience that he will eventually pass away. At the end of the final stanza, he uses an ellipse as *aposiopesis* to illustrate that death is more of a temporary interruption rather than an end.

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 near by  
take my ashes and scatter them thru out  
the Lower East Side... (p. 7).

He invites the immediate audience to directly communicate with him by scattering his ashes and granting his request. The larger potential audience fosters his continued existence by believing that the poem "ain't no lie," by remembering him, and by continuing the work he began. He will never be gone, forgotten, or separated from his neighborhood. "This concrete tomb is my home," he writes. This is where he lived and is where he will remain. Ironically, he finds a fixed place in memory through dispersal as the immediate audience memorializes him and "scatter(s)" his "ashes thru out the Lower East Side."

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<sup>4</sup> The use of the word "scatter" implies fragmentation and dispersal. It connotes the idea that Piñero's estate and remains (ashes and his work) be dispersed in the place that inspired them, and that different aspects of his messages can be carried out to others who find them useful.

Here Piñero's indigenous theme becomes more overtly vernacular and cosmopolitan. The United States and Puerto Rico, touted as utopias by governments and media in both locales, are demystified by their structural opposition to the Lower East Side *barrio*. For many Nuyoricans the United States was a place where the American Dream became a nightmare of "stabbing, shooting, gambling, fighting & unnatural dying" (p. 7). This demystification of the American Dream articulates the voices of the Hispanics and Latinos who account for the largest poverty rate among people of color in the United States, 20.3 percent (US Census Bureau, 2006). This impoverished life and lifestyle are often juxtaposed with utopian island images of Puerto Rico. However, Piñero's work alludes to the fact that Puerto Rico is also a place where the experiences of the Nuyorican are marginalized or abandoned. Since neither place felt like home Nuyorican became a socially constructed identity based on liminality, one that proved useful to artistic and social movement.

The liminal persona of Lower East Side Everyman is directly related to the poem's personal and vernacular tone. Piñero uses active voice and the first-person, singular pronoun "I" to illustrate that he is the personification of the Lower East Side, "I stand proud as you can see pleased to be from the Lower East" (Piñero, 1985, p. 7). The tone also suggests that there is no hyperbole here, that this is a depiction of street reality. He is "strong," "a street fighting man," who "climbs up" and "dream(s)" his "lungs out." He makes his voice heard. At the same time, however, he embraces and celebrates his situation and recognizes his space and place in face of death. Audience members are asked to see him as their constituent and fellow community member for each one of them could find himself or herself in a similar predicament. As such, they are asked to hear, understand, and grant his requests. The tone suggests that Piñero intended the poem as both the directive for an event within a particular community and as identification based on shared common experiences between himself and multiple audiences. This is supported by the overall vernacular cosmopolitan and indigenous concerns of the poem, which keep the author present and alive as he engages the tensions between his life and death within the spatial dimensions of the Lower East Side.

The poem's structure is thematic and repetitive. It is thematic because it is organized along the axes of space and time: movement between space and place (stanzas one, two, three, four, seven, eight), and temporal movement from the present (stanzas one and two), through the past (stanzas three, four, five) and back to the present with a signal toward the future (stanza six, seven, eight). It is repetitive because it makes its "burial request" seven times and relates each theme to each version of the request in grammatical tense. Additionally, Piñero affirms the validity of this poem as last will and testament four times in stanza six:

all that's true  
all that's true  
all that is true  
but this ain't no lie  
when I ask that my ashes be scattered thru  
the Lower East Side (p. 7).

Repetition of these thematic elements signals that they comprise a key idea that must be emphasized within Piñero's cultural and rhetorical situation (Campbell & Jamieson, 1978). This repetition enhances the effect of the appeal by stressing its importance to the man and to the Nuyorican identity he attempts to project and memorialize.

The structure takes the form of a three-dimensional map of the Lower East Side. Stanza one outlines the contours of the Lower East Side from atop the "tenement sky." This first dimension represents the type of aerial or panoramic perspective one acquires near the end of one's life. It is from this perspective which the author alone is able to "cry" out and express his "dream" as his he remembers his own life. This suggests that Piñero is able to express and examine in language that which he was unable to do in life. His "cry" is a sign of life, of "new birth." So this is not just a poem about death. It is a poem about life. It is no surprise that form follows function here as the poem begins in the present tense. As one who knew his end was near, ("just once before I die") Piñero occupies a reference point not otherwise obtainable. From this point he is more able to accurately evaluate, and if necessary gain leverage against, the possibility that he may be forgotten. In this sense he embodies a critical-active rather than a passive worldview that is maintained even as he transitions to examine past and stage future events.

Piñero sees the lives of others from this bird's eye view provided by the "tenement sky." Consequently, he addresses the audience from this omnipresent perspective in the second stanza. Since he is alive, he informs audiences that this poem is not to be mistaken as a cause for mourning. The immediate audience must "let all eyes be dry." Piñero has already cried. Since he has already cried, he is now ready to celebrate and "sing" his "song tonight," thus indicating nighttime as the setting for the memorial parade. This is also symbolically significant because "singing...song" is the method for reinserting himself into the world as a kind of second birth through which he confirms the naked fact of his identity as he sees it at that moment. This second birth is why stanza two addresses the present.

So let me sing my song tonight  
let me feel out of sight  
and let all eyes be dry

when they scatter my ashes thru  
the Lower East Side (Piñero, 1985, p. 7).

Stanza three marks the beginning of spatial transition from aerial to ground level. It sketches the physical borders of the Lower East Side from South to North and West to East.

From Houston to 14th Street  
from Second Avenue to the mighty D  
here the hustlers and suckers meet  
the faggots and freaks will all get high  
on the ashes that have been scattered  
thru the Lower East Side (p. 7).

This ground level depiction makes the physical world of the poem a real physical world through which the ashes are scattered. Stanza four defines Piñero's place within the space of the Lower East Side.

There's no other place for me to be  
there's no place other that I can see  
there's no other town around that  
brings you up or keeps you down  
no food little heat sweeps by  
fancy cars & pimps' bars & juke saloons  
& greasy spoons make my spirits fly  
with my ashes scattered thru the  
Lower East Side... (p. 7).

We now descend from atop the "tenement" sky as an earthly heaven and see aspects of the Lower East Side that "keep you down" at street level. Street level is hellish and parasitic. The Lower East Side contains heaven and hell so there is no need for Piñero to exist elsewhere.

The structural theme transitions from mapped space to populated place in the honest account of the author's deeds in stanzas five, six, and seven. Piñero brings the streets to life by filling in the map with those hardened characters he meets along his way: "faggots," "freaks," "hustlers and suckers," "pimps," "bums and men of style," crooked policemen, crying mothers, runaway children and "dope wheelers." The streets are the literal and figurative ground for biographical testimony and constitute Piñero's ontology and his "place to be." The ellipsis at the end of stanza four marks the temporal transition from present place to past wrongdoing. He testifies about the past with honesty and pride: "a thief, a junkie I've been, committed every known sin" (p. 7). The disclosure Piñero's identity and Lower East Side indigeneity, which are implicit in his language and actions, would be incomplete without this biographical testimony. In a sense he erects himself as a symbol that cannot be disconnected from the Lower East Side's Nuyorican identity. The idea of staying connected is reinforced by the sense of sight Piñero uses to explain his perspective in stanzas two, four, and seven.

Moreover, Piñero will connect his perspective with others' and thereby remain present after death. He will take on this vernacular cosmopolitan connection between self and other because his life provides a set of instructions.

So, here I am look at me  
I stand as proud as you can see  
pleased to be from the Lower East  
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  
This concrete tomb is my home  
To belong to survive you gotta be strong  
You can't be shy less without request  
someone will scatter your ashes thru  
the lower East Side (p. 7).

This Lower East Side Everyman survived life's literal and figurative highs and lows, and is a noteworthy representative. He fought, was an outlaw, an inmate, a ghetto philosopher, even hoped to be a thorn in the side of the establishment. While he takes a moment to determine the cause of his death as "ghettocide," the harsh lifestyle that accompanies a street life, he also reclaims the ghetto affectionately as his indigenous location or "home." The ghetto is a place that taught him



the rules by which he lived and a place that will honor him for living and dying by those rules. This is evidence that *A Lower East Side Poem* is a last will and testament. It illustrates how a person becomes relevant through being and testimony, “through the spoken word in which he identifies himself...announcing what he does, has done, and intends to do” (Arendt, 1998, p. 179). It also ensures that his ashes and memory, his estate, will be distributed according to his wishes and not according to some extrinsic non-Nuyorican formula.

The final stanzas underscore Piñero’s active present-oriented stance. He does not want to be buried and he does not want to rest in any one location within the *barrio*. Rather, he wants to remain mobile and liminal yet indigenous and cosmopolitan.

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 near by  
Take my ashes and scatter them thru out  
The Lower East Side... (Piñero, 1985, p. 7).

Home is not found among the competing ideals of utopia: Puerto Rico and United States suburbia. There is no pretense that going anywhere else will solve problems or bring peace and happiness. His home is metaphorically presented as the “concrete tomb” he has sketched out in the poem, “the place Piñero dies but cannot live in” (López, 2005, p. 207). He pleads with the audience and asks to be kept “near by” so that he can continue to witness all of the sights and sounds that made him who he was, “a problem of this land.” By embracing his geographical location and closing himself up in “this land” away from the outside world, Piñero suggests acknowledgment of the tribulations and transitions of life in the Lower East Side. Further, he strengthens his plea for the dispersal of his remains throughout the area. He knows exactly where his home is and that is where he wants to remain. His identity is fixed in and at the same time free-floating “thru out the Lower East Side” because of the memory he bequeaths to the audience. Therefore, the decision to honor his request is left to the audience. Scattering his ashes means that the audience accepts his testimony and renders justice by granting his request. Remembering him as a living part of the Lower East Side means that the wider audience renders justice by accepting the authenticity and validity of his testimony as a statement of Nuyorican identity.

## CONCLUSION

Piñero’s *A Lower East Side Poem*, though decades old, remains significant and should be praised as a powerful iteration of Nuyorican identity for several reasons. First, it achieves its purposes through persuasive impact. The poem asks a best friend to stage a memorial service and he does so. The poem asks the immediate audience to scatter the poet’s ashes throughout the Lower East Side and they do so. It asks the wider audience of readers to remember Piñero as he is represented in the poem—as both cosmopolitan and indigenous. To the degree that his oeuvre is still read, studied, discussed, and represented this audience has also granted his request. Piñero justifies why he should be remembered by establishing common ground with his audiences through tone and persona. The argument takes the audience to one moment before the Nuyorican author dies and proposes action. He asks them to both send him on his way by scattering his ashes and to keep him “near by” in their memories. Audience participation, specifically granting this burial request, transforms the poem into the event of itself.

Second, in accomplishing all of its multiple purposes the poem successfully demonstrates how vernacular cosmopolitanism and indigenous politics are thoroughly intertwined in Nuyorican identity and memory. *A Lower East Side Poem* allows Piñero to take his individual and collective place. The invocation of memory addresses the problem of Nuyorican identity by temporarily resolving the individual and collective tensions between presence and absence, cultural relevance and irrelevance. Piñero provides instructions for the Nuyorican community’s survival as Lower East Side Everyman. He makes examples of his own actions, thoughts, and emotions, which are defended and critiqued, to influence audience behavior. He shows them how to survive by creating an image of himself that survives. He thus outfits the Nuyorican community for survival. Ultimately, the poem is a fitting response to a life of Nuyorican words and action lived in the Lower East Side.

Third, the intrinsic reality presented in the poem is consistent with the extrinsic reality of the Lower East Side. The boundaries drawn in the poem reflect the neighborhood’s physical boundaries. The conflicting political forces are reflected in the structure. Since Nuyoricans found themselves in the crossfire of competing national interests, they responded by creating their own social and linguistic identities. The internal/symbolic and external/material similarities

continue. Piñero's own depictions of the neighborhood's mean streets reflect the obdurate nature of many of its inhabitants. However, alternative views are also provided. From a Lower East Side resident's perspective, the area was the site of a "tenement sky," whose view was solitary and isolating because "there's no other place that I can see." This is also consistent with the history of the area. The poem expresses many Nuyoricans' "experience and frustration with the vicious marginalization and decline of the *barrios* of New York" (Mele, 2000, p. 203).

Piñero reflects the social, political, and economic pressures facing Nuyoricans in terms of indigeneity and vernacular cosmopolitanism.

Every Nuyorican is forced by the need of survival to risk taking a stand against the law, just as the Puerto Rican, the Indian, the African, and the South American, and the Mexican have been forced by the same requirements of survival to migrate from their own lands (Esteves, 1987, p. 164).

This migration is reflected in his fluid poetic form which explores and examines events in the life a Nuyorican and in the lives of all Nuyoricans—including but not limited to the effects of displacement, rapid industrialization, deterioration of the American Dream, poverty, immigration, United States race relations, and national autonomy for the island of Puerto Rico. The poetic writing style is a structural choice to represent fluidity between cultures and between human imagination and actual lived experience. However, the style evolved as much out of artistic choice as it did out of material conditions. Since Piñero did not have the economic resources to publish a longer text at this point in his life, he wrote about what he lived in short verse. Consequently, this rhetoric is as much about subsistence as it is about ways and norms, how people are convivial and how identities and texts are produced. Humanizing and personifying the Lower East Side as an indigenous Nuyorican location helps us to understand Piñero and his environment. It serves as one more way to see and ultimately identify the situation through Piñero's own eyes.

Fourth, *A Lower East Side Poem* is call for both nostalgia and insurgency. It is invented to disrupt the status quo, to make audiences attend to and care about the living conditions of its inventors. It makes requests and affirms life in the shadow of death. Theoretically, the poem works to establish Nuyorican identity in the realms of language, of space and place and time. As Algarín (1994) writes, it is about private and public transformation. Such transformations are both socially and psychologically critical. Thus, like its author, *A Lower East Side Poem* lives divided between the United States and Puerto Rico and between life and death (Anzaldúa, 1999). So before answering the question of who am I, Piñero answers the questions: Where am I? When am I? What am I? Consequently, he considers identity construction as a forensic-epideictic exercise. It requires an understanding of motives and an honest accounting for one's life. It constructs memories about past events and deliberates about the future. It involves naming actions and determining one's own standards of justice and injustice. It extends beyond any single person and exists as an invitation to address, remember, and imagine a group of people and their histories.

Finally, *A Lower East Side Poem* adds another voice to the field of communication generally and to Puerto Rican Studies specifically by representing a particular subset of this demographic, Nuyoricans (Rodriguez, 1990). This group occupies a unique status as United States immigrant-citizens, with a uniquely cosmopolitan, indigenous, and urban sensibility. The Nuyorican call for representation as an artistic and social voice emerges out of a value conflict—between upstanding citizen and outlaw, between United States and Puerto Rican cultures and histories, between racial identifications. Rather than selling or sensationalizing a troubled existence, *A Lower East Side Poem* is about coming to grips with the end of such an existence. It territorializes Piñero's life within the Lower East Side and marks his "concrete tomb...home." It asks survivors to continue mapping the Nuyorican worldview Piñero was unable to fully detail. In this process the Nuyorican's boundaries are ever expanding, all the way to the United States Supreme Court, bringing new intercultural and interpersonal connectivity and leaving a legacy of Nuyorican rhetoric worthy of continued attention, analysis, evaluation, critique, and comparison.

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## APPENDIX

### *A Lower East Side Poem*

By Miguel Piñero

<sup>1</sup>Just once before I die  
I want to climb up on a  
tenement sky  
to dream my lungs out till  
I cry  
then scatter my ashes thru  
the Lower East Side.

<sup>2</sup>So let me sing my song tonight  
let me feel out of sight  
and let all eyes be dry  
when they scatter my ashes thru  
the Lower East Side.

<sup>3</sup>From Houston to 14th Street  
from Second Avenue to the mighty D  
here the hustlers and suckers meet  
the faggots and freaks will all get  
high  
on the ashes that have been scattered  
thru the Lower East Side.

<sup>4</sup>There's no other place for me to be  
there's no other place that I can see  
there's no other town around that  
brings you up or keeps you down  
no food little heat sweeps by  
fancy cars & pimps' bars & juke saloons  
& greasy spoons make my spirits fly  
with my ashes scattered thru the  
Lower East Side...

<sup>5</sup>A thief, a junkie I've been  
committed every known sin  
Jews and Gentiles...Bums and Men

of style...run away child  
police shooting wild...  
mother's futile wails...pushers  
making sales...dope wheelers  
& cocaine dealers...smoking pot  
streets are hot and feed off those who bleed to death...

<sup>6</sup>all that's true  
all that's true  
all that is true  
but this ain't no lie  
when I ask that my ashes be scattered thru  
the Lower East Side.

<sup>7</sup>So here I am, look at me  
I stand proud as you can see  
pleased to be from the Lower East  
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  
this concrete tomb is my home  
to belong to survive you gotta be strong  
you can't be shy less without request  
someone will scatter your ashes thru  
the Lower East Side.

<sup>8</sup>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 near by  
take my ashes and scatter them thru out  
the Lower East Side