



Article

“What to Do with the Dangerous Few?”: Abolition-Feminism, Monstrosity and the Reimagination of Sexual Harm in Miguel Piñero’s “Short Eyes”

Laura E. Ciolkowski

Department of Women, Gender, Sexuality Studies, University of Massachusetts-Amherst,
Amherst, MA 01003, USA; lciolkowski@umass.edu

Abstract: The problem of child sexual abuse (CSA) is a crucial point of entry into abolition-feminist conversations about justice and punishment, healing and repair. The popular belief that the “child sex offender” is uniquely irredeemable, eternally depraved and dangerous can trouble abolition-feminist efforts to address the devastating harm of CSA without reproducing the violence of prison and punishment. It also forces us to return to the question of “what to do with the dangerous few?” A familiar “tough on crime” refrain, this question mystifies the social, economic, and political conditions that nurture interpersonal violence. It also illustrates how centering our attention on “the monster in our midst” feeds an attachment to the mistaken belief that sexual harm is locatable in individual, bad people; that it is fixable by criminal law, and, in short, that justice and repair can be measured by the number of years one is sentenced to live behind bars. Miguel Piñero’s 1972 play “Short Eyes” exposes the failure of our attempts to incarcerate our way out of child sexual abuse and opens a literary-artistic space in which to explore the roots of violence and the abuse of power. The play dramatizes the particular ways in which the incarceration of those deemed the worst of the worst does not alleviate suffering or promote safety; rather, it prevents us from getting to the root of even the most horrific forms of abuse and from fully engaging, confronting and, finally, interrupting the daily, quotidian acts of sexual violence that are hiding in plain sight.

Keywords: abolition-feminism; child sexual abuse; Miguel Piñero; literature; prison



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1. Justice in America

Child sexual abuse and sexual predators are perhaps the only topics as politically volatile as terrorism.

(Joseph Fischel 2016, p. 25)

Those of us who are committed to ending the system of mass criminalization have to begin talking more about violence. Not only the harm it causes, but the fact that building more cages will never solve it.

(Michelle Alexander 2020)

The stories we tell about violence shape our day-to-day life. They cultivate our awareness of safety and danger, and they also frame our individual, community, and cultural responses to harm, justifying the laws, policies, and punitive practices that are put in place, we are told, to keep some of us safe. In the U.S., these are elaborate systems of incarceration, policing, and correctional control (including probation and parole) that, together, ensnare over 5.7 million people (Prison Policy Initiative 2022). The stories we tell about violence in America have helped to make the carceral system in the U.S. not just the largest in the world, but also the most expansive in all of human history.

Living at the dead-center of each of these stories, shapeshifting from year to year, but always threatening violence is the outsized figure of the monster. As Danielle Sered (2019)

has put it, “At the heart of [the narrative that secured the rise of mass incarceration] is the story of an imagined monstrous other—a monster who is not quite human like the rest of us, who is capable of extraordinary harm and incapable of empathy [. . .] a monster we and our children have to be protected from at any price” (1).

The “monstrous other” at the core of the particular story of violence that I would like to explore here is the “child sex offender” and the harm that will be my focus is child sexual abuse (CSA). I am interested in the literary representation of the child sex offender in the work of twentieth century poet and playwright Miguel Piñero (1946–88), and more broadly, because the problem of child sexual abuse is a crucial point of entry into abolition-feminist conversations about violence and harm, justice and punishment. The monstrous figure of the child sex offender embodies category crisis (monster/human), the threat of boundary violation (adult/child) and the uncontrollable excesses of sex and violence. The popular belief that he—upwards of 90% of people convicted of CSA identify as men ([GenerationFIVE 2007](#), p. 14)—is uniquely irredeemable, eternally depraved and dangerous can impede abolition-feminist efforts to focus on repair rather than retribution and to address the devastating harm of CSA without reproducing the violence of prison and punishment. The specter of the child sex offender is frequently enlisted as proof that there are, in fact, monsters out there and those monsters must be caged, quarantined, and sometimes even destroyed ([DiBennardo 2018](#); [Ilea 2018](#)).¹

In many respects, the figure of the child sex offender represents a horizon of violence so monstrous that it has inspired some of the most extreme measures to protect against harm ([Spencer 2009](#); [Simon 1998](#)). These measures include not just vigilante violence, disproportionately long or extended prison sentences, surgical/chemical castration, and life-long surveillance in the form of sex offender registries (SOR) that commonly include restrictions on work, residency, and movement both locally and globally,² but also civil commitment statutes, currently in force in 20 states and the District of Columbia,³ which allow for the indefinite incapacitation and control in mental health facilities of anyone convicted of a sex crime involving a minor, even after their prison sentences have been completed ([Koeppel 2018](#); [Steptoe and Goldet 2016](#); [Leon 2011](#)).

The threat introduced by the figure of the child sex offender ultimately forces us to return to the question of “what to do with the dangerous few?” A familiar “tough on crime” refrain, this question mystifies the conditions that nurture interpersonal violence by fixating on the singular figure of the “sexual predator”. It also illustrates how centering our attention on “the worst of the worst”, the “dangerous few”, the “monsters in our midst” feeds an attachment to the mistaken belief that sexual harm is locatable in individual, bad people; that it is fixable by criminal law, and, in short, that justice and repair can be measured by the number of years one is sentenced to live behind bars. As Joseph Fischel has explained, there is a very real danger in representing sexual violence as “individuated, pathological and most importantly, punitively fixable through the juridical arm of the state” (37). When we approach child sexual violence as a criminal-legal problem focused on retribution and the punishment of bad people rather than as an abuse of power that is necessarily entangled with heteropatriarchal cultural norms, racial, sexual, and economic privilege, and community practices that celebrate and reward violence against the most vulnerable, our critical tools for preventing and responding to harm are dangerously blunted.

2. Storytelling for Survival

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.

—Miguel Piñero (2010), “A Lower Eastside Poem”

Miguel Piñero's 1972 play "Short Eyes" excavates this architecture of violence, boldly exposing the failure of our attempts to incarcerate our way out of CSA and opening a literary-artistic space in which to explore the roots of violence and the abuse of power. Staged entirely from within the confines of a New York City jail, "Short Eyes" (the phrase is slang for "child sex offender") is centered on the jail rape and murder of a white, middle-class man, Clark Davis, who is incarcerated while awaiting charges for the rape of a Puerto Rican girl. Piñero's brutal depiction of state and interpersonal violence and abuse of power in the play directly challenges carceral responses to CSA. The play dramatizes the particular ways in which the incarceration of those like Clark, who are deemed the worst of the worst, does not alleviate suffering or promote safety; rather, it prevents us from getting to the root of even the most horrific forms of abuse and from fully engaging, confronting and, finally, interrupting the daily, quotidian acts of sexual violence that are hiding in plain sight.

Written while Piñero was incarcerated in Sing Sing, where he enrolled in a theater workshop run by Marvin Felix Camillo and Clay Stevenson, "Short Eyes" was brought to the Public Theater by Joseph Papp in 1973, after Piñero's release, and then to Broadway. Directed by Camillo, the early productions of the play featured a cast of formerly incarcerated actors from The Family, a theater company that was launched by Camillo and two others, including the actress Colleen Dewhurst, to build on and grow the theater arts work of incarcerated writers, poets and practitioners like Piñero. Significantly, The Family staged its first full production in 1972, in a climate shaped by the uprising and massacre of prisoners at Attica in September 1971 and, importantly, the two lesser-known uprisings that preceded it, in August and October 1970, inside the notoriously overcrowded New York City house of detention, known as "the Tombs", which is the setting for "Short Eyes" (Mack 2020).⁴ The subsequent flurry of prison arts activity, post-Attica, including the launch of the PEN America Center's Prison Writing Program late in 1971 and the explosion of arts programming like Camillo's in Sing Sing and also in Bedford Hills in the early 1970s, can be understood as a predictable "crisis management" response to the organizing, resistance, and unrest erupting in prisons and jails across the country and the demands by incarcerated people for recognition of their basic human rights, including due process protections, access to quality healthcare, religious freedom, education, and the right to "peaceful dissent" (Thompson 2016).⁵ However, prison arts programming also made room for the imaginative labor and literary visions of artists like Piñero, who modeled in his work a deep sensitivity to the rhythms of carceral spaces like Sing Sing and "the Tombs" and an appreciation for the trauma and pain of characters who also routinely find joy, make art and build community amongst the sexual outlaws, felons, and hustlers that "respectable" outsiders openly despise.

For some, especially those in positions of power, the critical success of "Short Eyes" legitimized the model of art as crisis management; it also further elevated the profile and the cultural value of prison theater and the arts. The play won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best American Play, an Obie Award for Best Director and six Tony Award nominations. It also rapidly hurled Piñero to fame as a playwright and poet whose history as a hustler and felon was expertly repackaged for his Broadway audiences as "local color". Audience members and theater critics of Piñero's work loved what Joseph Papp called Piñero's "superrealistic view of life from the underground" (Miguel Piñero Is Remembered with Poetry 1988, p. 14). Embraced as a "saintly outlaw" (Kent 1977, p. 1), Piñero brought into the theater, at a relatively safe distance, the violence of life on the streets and inside the expanding carceral spaces of Nixon-era America.⁶ During the early years of Nixon's so-called war on drugs, especially, there was a healthy market for the kind of realist aesthetic, on stage and on screen, that was Piñero's signature form, artistic language, and also an intimate part of his own carceral biomythography.⁷

Cycling in and out of detention facilities for most of his life, including Otisville, Rikers Island, Sing Sing (Ossining), and the Manhattan Detention Complex in New York City, on which the jail in "Short Eyes" is based, Piñero began his carceral odyssey at the age of 11, soon after he migrated with his family from Puerto Rico to the Lower East Side.⁸ It

was there, on the streets of his beloved “Loisaida”, that Piñero, a self-described “ghetto child, burglar, and drug addict” (McKesson 1974, p. 85) first acquired the extensive training in hustling, dealing, sex and survival, which he later turned into prose and poetry. “A thief, a junkie I’ve been/committed every known sin”, he wrote in “A Lower East Side Poem”. “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” (5). Piñero saw and expressed with clarity in his work the many contradictions embedded in his position as a celebrated street prophet and co-founder, with Miguel Algarín, of the Nuyorican Poets Café in New York City in 1973 and, at the same time, “a street-fighting man/a problem of this land” (Piñero p. 5). He understood that no matter how much success he found amongst the literati and the white-faced deep-pocketed Broadway theatergoers who paid to see his work, he would always also remain a cancer of the ghetto, threatening contagion, and a sexual outlaw whose relationships with men and boys, including the painter Martin Wong, were an open secret.⁹ Piñero would always be a “problem of this land”, living most days in the crosshairs of state surveillance and control rather than in the protected spaces of race and class privilege. In the poem “The Lower East Side is Talking”, Piñero wrote, “Men like me are never free” (Piñero p. 65). Up until his death at the age of 41 from cirrhosis of the liver, most likely related to AIDS (Bernstein 2010, p. 135), Piñero lived with the irresolvable but also generative tensions between his attraction to the artist and theater community that embraced him, for the most part, after the successful run of “Short Eyes”,¹⁰ and his fierce attachment to life on the streets and the joys of ghetto life that, as he put it in “Lower East Side Poem”, “make my spirits fly” (Piñero p. 4).

The city that serves as the urban stage for such tensions is, for Piñero, a central character in all of his work. It emerges for him not just as a physical space, but as an elaborate landscape of power that shapes not just how one moves or how one lives (in confinement or out on the “bastard streets” [Piñero p. 46], as Piñero affectionately referred to them), but also, most significantly, who one is. The city is thrumming with life for Piñero. It is, in his work, an organizing force, an instrument of social differentiation that brands some bodies as disposable, out of place, subject to surveillance, control and confinement. Immortalized in his poetry and infused in plays like “Short Eyes”, “NuYorican Nights at the Stanton Street Social Club” (1980), “A Midnight Moon at the Greasy Spoon” (1981) and “The Sun Always Shines for the Cool” (1976), among others, ghetto life was embraced by Piñero as both playground and battleground. It signified pleasure and freedom as well as the often debilitating racial and sexual exploitation and abuses of power that Piñero dissects in “Short Eyes”. In plays like “Short Eyes”, Piñero lays out a daunting map of carceral power. However, he also stubbornly persists in finding pleasure in art and community, both of which were, for him, sources of intellectual and creative nourishment and also tools of resistance to the particular forms of policing, abandonment and violence that continued to shape his life. Taken as a whole, Piñero’s body of work is an expression of art as tactic, as method, as an indispensable practice of freedom inside multiple and interlocking systems of oppression—what José Esteban Muñoz would call “disidentification”:

Let me be clear about one thing: disidentification is about cultural, material, and psychic survival. It is a response to state and global power apparatuses that employ systems of racial, sexual, and national subjugation. These routinized protocols of subjugation are brutal and painful. Disidentification is about managing and negotiating historical trauma and systemic violence.

(Muñoz 1999, p. 161)

For Piñero, art was a disidentificatory maneuver and survival strategy. It enabled him to live and dream on both sides of the dominant culture that alternatively exalted him and sentenced him to live in cages.

3. Cartographies of Power and Violence: Reimagining Race, Class and Sex in Carceral Spaces

I was built for prison.

—Miguel Piñero

The criminal justice system, an institution of violence, domination, and control, has increased the level of violence in society.

—(INCITE!-Critical Resistance 2001)

The cartographies of power and violence in “Short Eyes” are so complex because they are not just baked into the deeply racialized and gendered systems of punishment directed by the state; they are also tightly sewn into the intimate relationships and patterns of subjection that characterize, for Piñero, the world at large, as well as the jail “society within a society” (Wahls 1974, p. 1), which ultimately exacts its own retributive justice (in the form of rape and murder) against Clark, the “child rapist”, who is at the center of the play. Incarceration does nothing to disrupt these patterns or to address the unequal distribution of resources and life chances, along the axes of race and class, sexuality and gender that enabled Clark to misuse his white privilege and heteropatriarchal power in the first place. Rather, in “Short Eyes”, the modern carceral system, which includes not only prisons and jails, but also child welfare agencies, juvenile and immigrant detention centers, and prison psychiatric hospitals, replicates the violence—physical, sexual, racial and economic—and the abuses of power that make CSA possible. The House of Detention in “Short Eyes”, and, for Piñero, the penal system more broadly, is not broken; rather, it is designed to inflict trauma on the already traumatized, pain on those already suffering from the effects of domination and oppression, and physical, social, or civil death on those people whose disappearance is cast as inconsequential, wholly unremarkable, and utterly insignificant.

Piñero casts Clark Davis as a “handsome”, twenty-something, white, middle-class husband and father, and so his disappearance into the Tombs in Manhattan is none of these things. (Piñero p. 193) Clark’s rape of a child (numerous children, we learn later in the play), leads him, initially, not to jail, where a white middle-class husband and father apparently does not belong, but to a psychiatric hospital for observation, where, Clark reports, he is sent by a sympathetic judge “for my benefit and the benefit of society” (Piñero p. 229). Yet, Clark’s confinement maps out with even greater clarity the complex relationship between power, wielded or deputized by the state, inequality, and sexual violence. In the psychiatric ward where Clark is being held, the female nurses exercise their full control over Clark’s body, subjecting him to the kind of sexual objectification, abuses, and humiliation that Clark believes he is entitled to exercise over the girls he rapes. “Viewed by interns and visitors like some abstract object, treated like a goddamn animal monster . . . [I was] humiliated by some crank nurses who strapped me to my bed and played with my penis to see if it would get hard for ‘big girls like us’” (Piñero p. 229). Sexual abuse in “Short Eyes” is not a psychopathology rooted in a degenerate male body, the medicalized signature of an “animal monster”, as Clark bitterly refers to himself, who must be caged indefinitely or destroyed to keep the rest of us safe from harm. It is, instead, grounded in systems of power and subjection and shaped by a culture of violence that feeds on and rewards the domination and exploitation of more vulnerable bodies. In 1974, when “Short Eyes” was first performed on Broadway and now, still, when civil commitment statutes allow for the indefinite incapacitation and control in mental health facilities of people convicted of a sex offense, this challenge to the medical model of gender-based violence is of great consequence. This is because it crucially shifts the emphasis in anti-violence work from the pathological body that must be controlled to the abuses of power, including forms of state violence, which, collectively, must be named, challenged, and, finally, eradicated. This commitment to centering an analysis of power and attending to the relationship between state and interpersonal violence is also a key component of abolition-feminist approaches to CSA. Understood through the lens of abolition-feminism, CSA is a form of violence that is always embedded within social relationships and sustained by larger ecosystems of

power. Abolition-feminist and disability justice organizer Mia Mingus explains, “No one is born knowing how to abuse, torture, rape, those things are taught. We all contribute to a society that enables violence to continue. Violence is a necessary tool to maintain power and oppression, not just an individual abnormality or tragedy” (13).¹¹

In “Short Eyes”, Piñero invites his largely white Broadway audiences into this critical conversation about CSA, justice and consequence; he also obliges his audience to bear witness to the violence of a system in which the threat of punishment for CSA effectively disincentivizes a person who has sexually abused a child from engaging in the work of accountability and repair. In a remarkable scene at the end of Act I of the play, Clark shares with Juan, a fellow inmate who becomes Clark’s unlikely confessor, the sordid details of the numerous acts of violence he has committed, and he describes with some degree of self-reflection the power and trust he has abused. “Oh, why do I always try to make their age higher than it really was. . . even to myself. She was young, much too young” (Piñero p. 207), Clark asks, exposing his internal wrangling with the patterns of denial that give him strength and also enabled his abusive behavior. However, once the intimate confessional space of this scene is interrupted, and Clark reenters the crowded day room of the jail, in which his physical body is at risk in ways that closely mirror the at-risk bodies of the girls he has assaulted, Clark’s willingness to hold himself accountable for the harm he has committed hardens into the defensiveness and denial of the child rapist: “I didn’t rape anybody. I didn’t do anything” (Piñero pp. 212–13), he says.

In the treacherous spaces of the play, Clark has little choice but to deny the harm he has caused, which is, of course, precisely the point. There is no room for accountability or repair in a system in which violence is the best response to violence, rape is the only answer to rape, and retribution is the single option encouraged and made readily available by the penal system in which Clark and his child victims are all trapped. “Society will never forgive me. . . or accept me back once this is openly known”, Clark says. He is largely correct, not just in the historical moment when Piñero’s play was written, but today, after almost 50 years of deepening and expanding what Judith Levine and Erica Meiners have dubbed the “sex offense legal regime” that is made up of “an ever-expanding body of laws and practices devised to punish and ‘manage’ people with sex-related convictions [. . .] So radical is the marginalization of the large and varied category of persons labeled ‘sex offenders’ that their existence has been called ‘social death’—a term sociologist Orlando Patterson used to describe slavery” (3). The choice between “social death” and accountability is hardly a choice for men like Clark and for others who understand the appetite for revenge that drives the culture of punishment in America. The officer Mr. Nett threatens Clark with rape, “I hope to God that they take you off this floor, or send you to Sing Sing. The men up there know what to do with degenerates like you” (Piñero p. 204).

This desire for vengeance is still evident in the criminal-legal response to those who have been convicted of violent crimes, such as the former USA Gymnastics team doctor Larry Nassar, who was convicted of hundreds of counts of child sexual abuse in 2018. In Nassar’s sentencing hearing, Judge Rosemarie Aquilina echoes Mr. Nett’s lightly veiled threat in “Short Eyes” and expresses her hope for Nassar to meet the same fate as Clark. “Our Constitution does not allow for cruel and unusual punishment . . . If it did, I have to say, I might allow what he did to all of these beautiful souls, these young women in their childhood, I would allow some or many people to do to him what he did to others” (Mencarini 2018). In the 175-year sentence she hands down, Judge Aquilina guarantees Nassar’s death in prison, “I just signed your death warrant”, she says, but she also, paradoxically, ensures that people like Nassar, who rape and abuse the children under their care, will continue to grow and flourish. This is because the Old Testament hunger for revenge does nothing to alter the conditions in which CSA can happen and, further, because it actually shrinks the space we need to create a broad culture of accountability in which to address and eliminate CSA. Schenwar and Law (2020) insist: “Again and again, we see that incarceration does not prevent rape or murder. If it did, the US would have the world’s lowest rates of sexual assault and murder since it has the highest rate of incarceration. [. . .]

Instead, our reliance on prisons lulls us into ignoring the social, cultural, and economic factors that lead to violence and ultimately make us less safe" (140).

The modern carceral system in "Short Eyes" finally anchors, reproduces and extends the many forms of violence, including sexual violence, from which it claims to offer protection. To reform this system of state-sponsored violence by chastising a guard, or by dispersing to other floors in the jail the men who have banded together to rape and murder Clark in the play's final act of vigilante violence, or to continue to cage and exact vengeance on the "worst of the worst", does nothing to advance justice or to address the structural conditions that perpetuate violence. In the cramped day room of the jail, or locked in a cell at night, there is no opportunity either to confront or to mitigate the human impact of the acts of sexual violence Clark has committed, only an incentive to "deny that you ever did anything". Mariame Kaba explains,

Let's say you killed somebody. Is the incentive in our culture and society at large that you should say you did that? Or is your incentive to [. . .] deny to the nth degree that you did it? And why is that? That's because the thing that's hanging over your head is that you go to prison for long periods of time. So it's in your interest in an adversarial system to deny that you ever did anything.

(Hayes 2019)

The opportunity for repair is not just physically impossible for Clark and, in turn, compromised for his victim who will be discredited by the state, but also cognitively denied. Clark is taken down to be identified by the girl he has raped, but he is unable to see through the two-way glass or to hear anything but the sound of a disembodied voice "asking me to turn around to say, 'Hello, little girl'" (Piñero p. 228). He is unable to speak, except to reenact the opening invitation of the sexual harm that he continues to publicly deny, and he is unable to comprehend the meaning of the scene in which the girl he has assaulted must see him once again.

JUAN: Did she identify you? Did she?

CLARK: I don't know. I didn't see anybody. . .
[. . .]

JUAN: Was there a lawyer for you there? Somebody from the courts?

CLARK: Juan, I really don't know. . . I didn't see anybody. . . and they didn't let me speak to anyone at all. . . they hustled me in and hustled me right out.

JUAN: That means you have a chance to beat this case. Did they tell you what they are holding you for?

CLARK: No. . . no one told me anything. (Piñero p. 228)

In "Short Eyes", justice as imagined by the state is, in short, a passive exercise in punishment. Clark is asked to do nothing for his child victim but to appear before her for identification, to follow directions blindly in a process that he finds opaque, and then to return to his cage without explanation. He cannot bear witness to the suffering of his victim, who remains silenced and invisible behind a pane of glass, and he is deprived of the human obligation to look directly at the signs of trauma he may have inflicted. "Unlike punishment", Sered argues, "accountability is not passive. Far from it. It is active, rigorous, and demands the full humanity of people who have committed harm" (96). In contrast, Clark acknowledges nothing as he stands emotionless in the lineup in the jail. He does nothing to return to his victim the dignity and sense of humanity that he may have taken from her. Michelle Alexander (2020) argues:

Our criminal injustice system lets people off the hook, as they aren't obligated to answer the victims' questions, listen to them, honor their pain, express genuine remorse, or do what they can to repair the harm they've done. They're not required to take steps to heal themselves or address their own trauma, so they're less likely to harm others in the future. The only thing prison requires is that

people stay in their cages and somehow endure the isolation and violence of captivity. Prison deprives everyone concerned—victims and those who have caused harm, as well as impacted families and communities—the opportunity to heal, honor their own humanity, and to break cycles of violence that have destroyed far too many lives.

4. Retribution, Violence and the “Meat Grinder” of the Penal Machine

The prison-industrial-complex has churned communities and people through a meat grinder, devastating people.

(—Mariame Kaba, Qtd in [Jaffe 2017](#))

Whether we consider physical death caused by self-harm, medical neglect, and state violence; social death caused by subsequent unemployment, homelessness, and stigmatization; or civil death experienced through political disenfranchisement and exclusion from citizenship rights, the violence of imprisonment is undeniable.

(—Sarah [Lamble 2015](#), p. 244)

In “Short Eyes”, Piñero cracks open the fictions we generate around prisons, including the paramount fiction that, as the feminist antiviolence collective “INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence” (now “Women, Gender Non-Conforming, and Trans People of Color Against Violence”) and the prison abolition group Critical Resistance insist, “punishment, harsh sentences and retributive attitudes” will “lessen victims’ pain, reeducate people who rape, or genuinely protect society” (INCITE). For Piñero, the answer to the question “what to do with the dangerous few”, therefore, cannot be to isolate and incarcerate. Rather, it must be to recalibrate the imbalances of power and uproot the systemic conditions that make CSA possible.

Piñero makes clear that unless we address the larger economies of race, sex, violence and power that drive the action in “Short Eyes”, embracing the play’s mandate to interrupt the state tactics and intimate patterns of abuse that are so pervasive on- and off-stage, this system will remain intact. It will continue not just to carry out harm, but also to stand in the way of healing long after the curtain has closed. We see this play out immediately after Clark’s death, when Clark’s white middle-class family, predictably, reasserts the claim of race and class power that masquerades as white innocence. His family’s intervention with the warden ultimately prompts the Captain of the jail to disguise the truth of Clark’s rape and murder, as well as the sexual crimes Clark has committed, daring bystanders to this egregious performance of power and privilege to break the cycle of violence that Piñero represents onstage. In the play’s last act, the Captain announces that Clark is not, in fact, a “child rapist”, as charged, but is, instead, “an innocent victim of circumstances” (Piñero p. 241), thereby denying Clark’s victims an opportunity to reckon with the sexual harm he has caused. The Captain officially rules Clark’s death a suicide and intentionally destroys the evidence of Clark’s rape and murder by the men in the jail.

Yet, Piñero makes it abundantly clear to his audience that Clark was not “an innocent victim of circumstances”. Clark raped not just one girl, but many girls, all of whom are, significantly, left unnamed by Piñero in “Short Eyes”. Clark’s guilt in the play, therefore, signals not just the extraordinary and reprehensible acts of child sexual abuse, but also the ordinary patterns of racialized and sexualized violence that are such a familiar feature of the world at large. Clark tells Juan: “The easiest ones were the Puerto Ricans and the black girls [. . .] I felt ashamed at first. . . but then I would rehearse at nights what to do the next time. . . planning” (Piñero p. 209). These girls are “easy” because they are caught at the intersection of multiple systems of power and inequality that make them even more vulnerable to the abuses of “respectable” middle class white men like Clark. Additionally, they are at risk not only because they are statistically much more likely to be the target of state harassment, criminalization, and violence rather than the object of police protection, but also because the Black and brown communities Clark targets are much less likely to

have access to the range of institutionalized remedies that are readily available to men like Clark. (Ritchie 2017) It is no coincidence that all the major child sexual violence laws in the U.S. are named for white children—The Jacob Wetterling Crimes Against Children and Sexual Offender Act (1994); Megan’s Law (1996); Jessica’s Law (2005); Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act (2006). Levine and Meiners point out, “There is no [...] federal (or, as far as we know, state) law named after a nonwhite child victim of violence. Maybe that’s because the violence that befalls [those] children [...] is considered unremarkable and unchangeable” (Levine and Meiners 2020, p. 42).

According to GenerationFIVE, a collaborative whose mission is to end the sexual abuse of children within five generations, “People who sexually abuse children are built, not born”. Their persistent question, fundamental to an abolition-feminist approach to CSA, is not how do we control such people and extract them from our communities to keep the rest of us safe, but “What do we need to change about our family, community and social norms, to stop building them?” (GenerationFIVE 2007, p. 56). To be clear, “Short Eyes” does not suggest that this cycle of violence might soon be coming to an end or that the broader penal infrastructure might suddenly crack and collapse on itself. Rather, as a work of theater, the play simply and powerfully calls on audiences to bear witness to suffering and struggle and to call out the root causes of sexual violence laid bare on stage. “Short Eyes” creates the groundwork for a kind of solidarity in the face of violence and the abuses of power that protect men like Clark and permit them to rape with impunity.

In “Short Eyes”, Piñero prompts his audience to ask, not “how can we find the monsters in our midst and make them disappear?” but, following Mingus, “how can we respond to violence in ways that not only address the current incident of violence, but also help to transform the conditions that allowed for it to happen?” (Mingus 2019) This model of transformative rather than retributive justice is grounded in a fundamental belief in human dignity, even for someone like Clark, “a sick fucking degenerate” (Piñero p. 204), “the lowest, most despicable kind of criminal” (Piñero p. 246). It also centers a deep faith in futurity and the human capacity for change. The dismantling of the gender, racial, and sexual economies that give Clark permission to abuse his white heteropatriarchal power in “Short Eyes” is, therefore, an abolition-feminist necessity, right alongside the cultivation of the communities of radical care and the strategies for survival in the face of rape, violence and neglect that would take their place.

This approach to harm in “Short Eyes” provides a nuanced roadmap for imagining an abolition-feminist response to CSA that understands justice as consequence (the loss of the power or position that gave someone the opportunity to abuse) rather than as retribution or punishment (prison or social death) and that builds capacity to confront the human impact of violence while also carving out a space for people to hold each other accountable for condoning, colluding with or perpetrating it. Nassar’s 175-year sentence, or the convictions of other men in recent high-profile rape cases like Daniel Holtzclaw, Harvey Weinstein, or R. Kelly, might signal the hard-earned recognition, across many decades of activism, that rape is a crime; but they move us no closer to ending sexual violence or repairing the harms that men like Clark and others have perpetrated against children. As Melissa Gira Grant has argued, “Jailing rapists won’t repair harm and it doesn’t work to prevent rape either” (Grant 2020). There is little chance that a prison sentence could have inspired Clark to renounce the power and privilege that made him feel entitled to abuse the bodies of the girls he raped or, as is clear in the judgment that Clark’s accuser is “not in her right mind” (Piñero p. 241), that the girls he raped would receive the help that they need or the freedom from racism and violence that they deserve simply because Clark is off the streets. The president and founder of the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN), the nation’s largest anti-sexual violence organization, was wrong to assure us that “the single most important thing we can do to prevent rape is to put more rapists in prison” (RAINN 2012). Instead, feminist anti-violence organizations like GenerationFIVE, and also Common Justice in New York, Project NIA in Chicago, the Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective, and the Storytelling and Organizing Project in Oakland, among others, are doing

the labor-intensive abolition-feminist work of crafting an approach to CSA and other forms of state and interpersonal violence that addresses the immediate need to interrupt abuse and prevent future harm without reproducing the violence of the carceral system. This means, following Angela Davis, crafting a brand of “abolition democracy” that includes “a continuum of alternatives to imprisonment—demilitarization of schools, revitalization of education at all levels, a health system that provides free physical and mental care to all, and a justice system based on reparation and reconciliation rather than retribution and vengeance” (Davis 2003, p. 107). It also means proactively developing the specific tools to expose and challenge the extraordinary and also ordinary forms of domination and exploitation that make the sexual abuse of children possible.

5. Epilogue: Reimagining a Prison Nation

The most difficult and urgent challenge today is that of creatively exploring new terrains of justice, where the prison no longer serves as our major anchor.

(—Angela Davis 2003, p. 21)

We live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable—but then, so did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art.

(—Ursula Le Guin 2014)

When you’re in prison, you’re nowhere being nobody. You’re a number. Writing poetry and acting made me somebody in the land of nothing.

(—Miguel Piñero, Qtd in Gussow 1974)

In 1974, barely one year after Piñero left Sing Sing, Fay Honey Knopp, the Quaker prison minister and co-author of the prison abolition “handbook” *Instead of Prisons* turned her undivided attention to addressing sexual violence through an abolitionist lens. Knopp insisted that “the issue of sexual abuse and how society responds to it is an abolitionist issue” (Knopp 1994, p. 203) because it crystalizes the enormous challenge of facing the person who has raped, looking deep into the core of the most reprehensible sexual harm, and responding with humanity rather than vengeance, and a commitment to building a “caring community” (Knopp 1994, p. 205) centered on healing and repair rather than a prison nation invested in violence, retribution and the fear of monsters. Like Piñero, she understood that prisons do not work to end sexual violence; they “do not reduce crimes or rehabilitate people, they rarely deter, and they provide no enduring protection of the public. Imprisonment punishes deeply and expensively in both human and fiscal terms, with damaging effects to both the individual and the community” (Knopp 1994, p. 204). Almost 50 years later, as many rejoice over the long prison sentences handed down to people convicted of rape and child sexual abuse, and gleefully seal an unholy alliance with the state, we continue to forget that prisons do not make us safer, but the cultivation of key values and community practices most definitely will. Sered has written:

What if the question is not: who is dangerous and how should we punish them? But rather, who are we incapable of holding safely in our communities, and what would it take to be able to hold them? If that is the [question, then the] solution lies in developing more tools, not in eliminating the person we fear. (87)

The stories we tell about violence are both the instruments of our subjection, ensnaring us in narratives of criminality or of innocence, narrowing the scope of what feels possible, reasonable, and right, and they are also the creative tools that we need to respond to harm and to imagine a world without violence. As Audre Lorde (2000) expressed so powerfully in her poem “Blackstudies”, published the same year that “Short Eyes” opened at the Vivian Beaumont Theater on Broadway in 1974, the stories we tell are often the instruments of racism, sexism, and white supremacy, the weapons that endanger us; but they can also be the artistic “food” that nourishes and gives us hope. In “Blackstudies”, Lorde marvels over her students’ hunger for stories, their voracious appetite for knowledge, their determination

to survive inside struggle. She wonders with the faith and eternal hopefulness of a great teacher: “What shall they carve for weapons/what shall they grow for food”. Like Lorde, Muñoz embraces hope as a strategy for thriving “in the face of an often heartbreaking reality” (Muñoz 2019, p. 207), surviving within and alongside disappointment and pain. Kaba (2021) describes hope as a discipline, a grueling but necessary daily practice that lives in the spaces between the trauma and pleasure of the past, the oppression and joy of the present, and the richness and possibility of an abolition-feminist future. Hope is, in short, both the greatest challenge and the proudest achievement of the artist who, like Piñero, survives each day to dream a different future. Sered continues:

Displacing our old stories will require allowing new ones—full stories, messy ones, ones that include wounds and rage and loss and sorrow and ambivalence and—sometimes, though not always—hope; stories that include the context in which violence takes place not as an excuse, but as a piece of the puzzle of ending it; stories that hold everyone accountable for harm, both the individuals who commit it and the societies that allow it; stories with both a before and an after. (14)

The stories we tell have the power to dislocate, demystify, and maybe even eradicate prison, policing, and punishment as the solutions to sexual violence. They also have the power to expose, as Piñero has achieved in “Short Eyes”, the ugliness and inhumanity of penal systems that advocate imprisonment without accountability for “child rapists”, and shame without the transformation of the individuals, communities, and institutions that actively perpetuate or passively collude with violence. As long as the stories we tell about CSA remain laser-focused on the depraved, dehumanized and “dangerous few” who must be weeded out, extracted from our communities, isolated and punished, we will continue to squander the opportunity to dismantle the elaborate infrastructure of racialized power, economic entitlement, and gender and sexual privilege that licenses some people to harm others. We will also miss the chance to face up to and interrogate our fierce imaginative investments in the radical otherness of people like Clark, who have committed acts of violence against children. Finally, we will lose the benefit of a key abolition-feminist insight: that lasting healing and repair, as well as change and the reimagination of a world without prisons or jails, must happen in community. “We can’t heal or hurt alone”, Kaba has said, “we must heal or hurt in relationship with other people” (Dixon and Piepzna-Samarasinha 2020, p. 296). Piñero understood this well, building community as a writer and poet in the Loisaída and focusing his artistic efforts on telling stories about life in the “bastard streets”, carceral spaces, and urban landscapes that not only confine and subject us, but also give us hope and, finally, hold the seeds of change. In “A Lower East Side Poem”, he sings out: “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” (Piñero p. 4).

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Notes

¹ Gillian Harkins (2020) explores the crucial ways in which this specter, or “cultural figure” of the pedophile “misdirects care from the actual targets of sexual harm” (3). She argues that when we focus our attention and our fears on “serial sexual offenders, the proverbial pedophiles driven by criminal psychopathology [who] are policed and prosecuted for harming other people’s children—in particular, high-status or white children” (202), we obscure the systems of power that create the opportunities in which child sexual abuse actually happens.

² The 2016 International Megan’s Law, for example, requires a “unique identifier” on the passports of anyone convicted of a sex offense against a minor. See (Levine and Meiners 2020, p. 10).

- 3 Since the 1990s, 20 states and the District of Columbia have passed laws that direct the attorneys general in these jurisdictions to appoint professionals to evaluate whether people convicted of a sex offense who have served their time have a mental abnormality or illness that would make them likely to re-offend. <https://washingtonspectator.org/koeppel-sex-crimes-and-criminal-justice/> (accessed on 4 June 2020).
- 4 In his 1972 autobiography *No Name in The Street*, James Baldwin (1972) recounts his visits to the Tombs to see William Anthony “Tony” Maynard, Jr., who was falsely accused of murdering a white marine in 1967 and spent over 6 years in various jails awaiting trial. In his description of the Tombs, Baldwin pays particular attention to the signs of racial and economic injustice that Piñero represents in much of his work, including “Short Eyes”. Baldwin writes: “Whoever wishes to know who is in prison in this country has only to go to the prisons and watch who comes to visit. We spent hours and hours, days and days, eternities, down at the Tombs, Val and I, and, later, my brother, David. I suppose there must have been white visitors; it stands, so to speak, to reason, but they were certainly overwhelmed by the dark, dark mass. Black, and Puerto Rican matrons, black, and Puerto Rican girls, black, and Puerto Rican boys, black, and Puerto Rican men: such are the fish trapped in the net called justice” (147–48). After a hung jury and a mistrial, Maynard was unjustly convicted of manslaughter in 1970 and spent several years in prisons, including Attica during the 1971 uprising, before his sentence was overturned in 1974.
- 5 Anoop Mirpuri (2019) argues that Attica gave the work of PEN “a particular urgency, as prison writing became invested with the power to help prevent” another uprising (48).
- 6 The increased interest in the early 1970s on writing by incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people about life in prison and the injustices of the criminal-legal system was also sparked by the 1969 occupation of Alcatraz by indigenous activists, the 1970 publication of George Jackson’s *Soledad Brother* shortly before his violent death in a prison escape attempt in 1971, and the extensive media coverage of the trial of Angela Davis in 1970. Bernstein (2010) calls the early decades of the 1970s “The Age of Jackson” (51) in recognition of the enormous impact that George Jackson and other incarcerated intellectuals and writers had on public discourse and social policy in these years.
- 7 In addition to his work as a playwright, Piñero was active throughout the 1970s and 80s as a “street dialect expert” for television police dramas, including *Kojak*, *Baretta*, and *Miami Vice*. He also took on small acting roles in shows like *Miami Vice*, and films like *Times Square* (1980) and *Fort Apache, the Bronx* (1981), typically playing the caricatured brand of Latino street criminal and hustler that his own writing, paradoxically, deepened and complicated. In 1977, *Short Eyes* was made into a feature film based on a script written by Piñero and directed by Robert Young. In 2001, Piñero was immortalized in Cuban-born filmmaker Leon Ichaso’s 2001 biopic *Piñero*.
- 8 Piñero and his family were part of the mass migration of mostly working class and poor people from Puerto Rico to New York City in the mid-twentieth century. According to Ramón Soto-Crespo (2009), “between 1940 and 1950, one-third of the Puerto Rican population migrated to the United States” (xi). This is a crucial backdrop for Piñero’s life and artistic work. Like other Nuyorican writers and poets, such as Pedro Pietri, Miguel Algarín and Tato Laviera, Piñero’s complicated relationship to his island heritage powered his literary imagination and also shaped his individual sense of self.
- 9 Martin Wong (1946–99) was among Piñero’s lovers and artistic collaborators in the 1980s when Wong and Piñero lived together on the Lower East Side. In addition to sketches and paintings of Piñero, including “Portrait of Mickey Piñero Tattooing” (1988), Wong’s work includes illustrations of scenes from “Short Eyes” and visual-artistic interpretations of the prose and poetry that Piñero shared with him.
- 10 Mills (2003) explores the critical reception of “Short Eyes”, unraveling the race and class biases that shaped the ways Piñero and his work were read and received.
- 11 See Davis et al. (2022) on abolition-feminism and the dangerous and often deadly intersections between state and interpersonal violence. Emily Thuma (2019) illustrates these intersections in her exploration of grassroots anti-violence organizing in the 1970s in connection with key cases against women in this period (Joanne Little, Dessie Woods, and Inez Garcia) who were prosecuted for killing the men who assaulted them.

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