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Gerardo C. Martinez

*University of Texas-Pan American*

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PORTRAYALS OF THE DEHUMANIZATION OF THE AMERICAN PRISONER  
IN MIGUEL PIÑERO'S *SHORT EYES* AND  
TOM FONTANA'S *OZ*

A Thesis

by

Gerardo C. Martinez

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Texas- Pan American  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2013

Major Subject: English



PORTRAYALS OF THE DEHUMANIZATION OF THE AMERICAN PRISONER  
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COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Dr. Marci McMahon  
Chair of Committee

Dr. Danika Brown  
Committee Member

Dr. Matthew Christensen  
Committee Member

May 2013



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## ABSTRACT

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This thesis analyzes the way in which Miguel Piñero, through his 1974 play *Short Eyes*, and Tom Fontana, through his television series *Oz*, portray the way in which American prisoners are transformed by a racially-defined code of behavior. This code of behavior, defined by Miguel Piñero as “the program” encourages inmates to over-identify themselves in terms of race and leads them to engage in behavior that contributes to their dehumanization. In the first chapter, the introduction, I establish the social, political, and theoretical concepts through which it is possible to analyze the process of prisoner identity transformation in these two works. In chapter two, I describe the process in which a prisoner's identity is divided through a reading of the both works using social identity theory. In the third chapter, I describe the way in which the program and its emphasis on race shape the creation of prison identities.





## DEDICATION

The completion of my master's studies would not have been possible without the support and love of my parents, Gerardo Martinez and Ada E. Martinez, as well as that of my brothers, Luis R. Martinez and Jorge A. Martinez. I would also like to deeply thank my soon-to-be wife, Lindsey Campbell for being patient with me when I was too consumed in my studies to give her the attention she whole-heartedly deserves. Finally, I would like to give a great word of appreciation to Mike Salinas and Yvette Vela for all their support and their patience through all I've asked from them during the past three years.



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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

*“At the very moment that Americans began to pride themselves on the openness of their society, when the boundless frontier became the symbol of opportunity and equality, notions of total isolation, unquestioned obedience, and severe discipline became the hallmarks of the captive society.” (David J. Rothman qtd in Schlosser 9)*

Freedom. Each day, more and more Americans are denied this unalienable right under the guise of an ever-changing set of rules and regulations that determines the legality, rather than the morality, of one’s actions. This is an important distinction because while moral codes tend to be harder to modify, the definition of what is legal and what is illegal is constantly changing. The prison has become the place that is used to limit the freedom of people whose actions have been deemed illegal *enough*, according to a society’s ruling class. The prison serves as a symbol of the arbitrary nature of our systems of incarceration. Ruth Wilson Gilmore writes about the paradoxical nature of the prison system and argues that the laws of any social order “change, depending on what, in a social order, counts as stability, and who, in a social order needs to be controller” (12). There is no absolute determinant of illegality, nor is there a table that clearly equates a certain action with a certain punishment.

This lack of clarity regarding crime and punishment has been a part of the American national consciousness for almost as long as the United States has been a country. This ambiguity has led to a legal system that has been used to discriminate toward specific groups of



people. In the post-Civil War south, for instance, as Gilmore explains, “an onslaught of legal maneuvers to guarantee the cheap availability of southern Black people’s labor outlawed both ‘moving around’ and ‘standing still’” (12). The absolute confusion that arises from a law that outlaws both moving and standing leads to a feeling of despair about the legal system’s ability to provide the freedom that is guaranteed by the United States constitution. The deliberate attempt to use the law in the post-Civil War south to control a black racialized minority did not stop there, as it can be seen today in the way that drug incarcerations continue to be racially biased. A 2011 story in *Time* Magazine, for example, cites a survey from the National Survey of Drug Use and Health that points out that black youth are ten times more likely than white youths to be arrested for drug use. This is despite black youth being less likely to actually engage in drug use (Szalavitz). If there were no bias in the enforcement of our nation’s anti-drug laws, one would expect the arrest statistic to reflect the statistics of drug use. However, we find that this is not the case.

The arbitrary nature of the definition of crime and punishment allows the elite in a society to use the law and its enforcement as an instrument of discrimination toward certain classes. Possible evidence for a bias in the enforcement of the law can be found in the fact that as of 2005, African Americans and Latinos combined to account for 65% of the prison population, but only 29% of the overall United States population. Of all U.S. men, whites were the least likely to be incarcerated, and a Latino’s chances of being incarcerated was 1.8 times higher. While doubling the likelihood of incarceration seems like a large discrepancy, it is nothing compared to an African American’s chances of going to jail, as they were 5.6 times more likely than whites to be incarcerated. Race and ethnicity is tied so closely to someone’s risk of incarceration that if these trends hold, it is projected that one in three African American males

born in 2001 will go to prison during their lifetime, while the likelihood decreases to one-in-six for Latinos, and one-in-seventeen for white males (Garland, Spohn, and Wodahl).

While the truth about incarceration can be discerned by turning to the research and looking up statistics, the American population is one that is usually blind in the plight of America's prisoners. My intent is not to dispute the view that the majority of the prisoners in jail deserve to be there. However, I do wish to point out that the punishment for many crimes is often inhumanely severe. In many instances, the essence of who the individual was before their time in prison changes profoundly— and for the worse. Prison has the effect of exaggerating systems of racialized societal fragmentation to the extent that race becomes the utmost determinant of who a person is and can become in this system. If race serves to influence someone's personality outside of prison, inside of prison it becomes a form of metaimprisonment that cannot be escaped. In cases like this, theatre and pop culture have a unique part to play, as they are able to provide clarity through stage and television representations of the injustices that are being perpetrated by our system of law and incarceration (Lahr 250).

### **Argument**

Puerto Rican playwright Miguel Piñero with his play *Short Eyes* (1974) dramatizes the lives of black, white, and Latino men while they live in the House of Detention, a jail house in New York City. In the play, Piñero shows audiences the way in which a prison's emotionally-charged, racially-divided ecosystem results in the disruption and destruction of a white pedophile's identity. The racial tensions in *Short Eyes* also drive another inmate to sacrifice his own sense of morality, essentially becoming more immoral than he was prior to incarceration, in order to save himself from harm. Tom Fontana, an Anglo-American writer, director, and producer of several critically and commercially successful television series, also depicts the

transformation of a new white prison inmate, in this case in the fictionalized Oswald Maximum Security Penitentiary. In this transformative process, we see an extreme amount of emotional and physical pain that is brought about by race. These two different works expose the process by which individual inmates are dehumanized to justify the need for the expansion of the prison-industrial complex.

This complex is essentially composed of the economic and political interests that benefit from the construction and maintenance of new prisons (Schlosser). In *Short Eyes*, Miguel Piñero, because of his own experience as a victim of this dehumanizing process as a former prisoner, attempts to disrupt the expansion of this amalgamation of political and economic interests by confronting audiences with the consequences of the prison system's expansion. In *Oz*, Tom Fontana, as someone who writes for television, a venue that is more concerned with ratings and critical praise than with promoting a social cause, chooses to display the consequences of the prison industrial complex, yet without necessarily preaching about its evil. As a result, the television show simply presents to audiences the mechanisms that lead to the dehumanization of more prisoners, rather than critique them.

While Tom Fontana's and Miguel Piñero's texts may differ in their motivations and reach audiences through different mediums, they both portray an identity split that first-time inmates go through when they enter penitentiaries. The characters that are portrayed in these works are depicted as developing a second identity that works as a façade, resulting in a division between the individual's identity prior to incarceration and a separate identity that is engaged in social interactions during incarceration. The way an individual self-conceptualizes who they were prior to their prison entry is known as their "pre-prison identity," while the second identity that they develop while in prison is known as their "prison identity." This second identity is constructed

by making observations of the prison environment and by using those observations to develop a persona that will be accepted and not be harassed by the other inmates (Schmid and Jones). In time, however, this prison identity becomes the dominant identity and is no longer just a façade that aids the survival of the inmate in prison. The prisoner, dehumanized by the stripping of his pre-prison identity, is changed. *Short Eyes* and *Oz* both depict a process of dehumanization that has been documented to occur with real-life prisoners.

Entry into the prison setting constitutes a major crisis in the life of a new inmate (Schmid and Jones 415). They are told that they will no longer have regular access to their families, they can no longer hold their regular job, and they no longer have many of the freedoms that they enjoyed on the outside. For many, incarceration represents giving up a large portion of someone's individuality, as they will be introduced into an environment that demands uniformity in everything they do. The time that one wakes up in the morning, the time that one eats, the time that one can engage in recreation activities, and the time that one has to go to sleep are all regulated. This deep clash between the life of individuality on the outside and the mandated uniformity of life on the inside causes the newcomer to fear for the person that they consider themselves to be: their pre-prison identity. In addition to the risk of losing one's individuality, prison is also seen as a brutal environment that represents a very real and immediate threat to the physical wellbeing of its residents. In order to avoid danger, both psychological and physical, the inmate develops a compartmentalized psyche in which two separate identities are maintained (Schmid and Jones 417).

Initially, the inmate develops these two identities to keep his pre-prison identity from being changed by the "unavoidable hardening effects of the prison environment" (Schmid and Jones 417). By separating his pre-prison and prison identities, an inmate is able to maintain who

he believes is the “real” identity—the identity that he identified with prior to his arrival in prison—separate from the person he might be forced to become to survive prison: his prison identity. This new prison identity, constructed and maintained for the singular purpose of surviving the prison environment, is something that occurs as the result of “identity preservation tactics, formulated through self-dialogue and refined through tentative interaction with others” (Schmid and Jones 419). Suspending one’s pre-prison identity and projecting a second, fictional prison identity are the two tactics which the inmate employs to survive prison.

These two works also show how, in time, the prisoner’s prison identity becomes the prisoner’s *only* identity. The social dynamics of the prison environment, these two texts suggest, demand that the prisoner exhibit his prison identity so consistently that he eventually forgets his pre-prison self. Chances for letting one’s guard down and projecting a pre-prison self are limited, as prison demands stoicism over emotionality. Eventually, the result is a phenomenon where the inmate acknowledges his “doubts about his ability to revive his suspended [pre-prison] identity” (Schmid and Jones 424). In many cases, real-life inmates, as Schmid and Jones argue, acknowledge that the system has greatly changed them.

The character arcs of the two main protagonists of *Oz* and *Short Eyes* – who are both first time inmates – provide the viewer with a look at the process through which these two identities are formed, as well as the functional impetus for their creation. The prison environment’s ability to strip an individual’s pre-prison identity from a person is acknowledged in one scene in *Oz*, in which the narrator Augustus Hill (played by Harold Perrineau) tells the audience during a monologue that

When you’re playing poker, you can’t let anybody on the table know which cards you have. What you’re feeling, what you’re thinking. You’ve gotta develop a

game face. In *Oz*, we wear our game face all day and into the night. You wear your game face so much, that when you look in the mirror, you're not sure which face you're shaving (*Oz* 1.08).

Although the characters in *Oz* and *Short Eyes* are fictional portrayals of inmates, lines like these serve as bridges between the fictional inmates portrayed in these shows and real life inmates like the ones interviewed by Schmid and Jones in their study of the development of the dual identities of prisoners. As such, the transformation of the inmates represented in these works can be taken as an acknowledgement and way of exposing the transformation that real life inmates go through during real-life incarceration.

This change in identity is represented as a dehumanizing process, as mild-mannered identities are being replaced by violent, aggressive identities that develop as a response to the brutal environment in which they are fostered. In *Oz*, we see Tobias Beecher, a white lawyer and father of two young children change profoundly as a result of his incarceration. By the end of the show's first season, he transforms from a quiet, reserved individual (albeit one with an alcohol abuse problem) into a violent maniac who blinds and defecates on the face of another inmate. In *Short Eyes*, Miguel Piñero shows the dehumanizing aspect of the evolution of prison identities by the way in which one of his fictional inmates, the white pederast, Clark Davis, is literally destroyed as a consequence of his inability to develop a prison identity; Cupcakes, a Puerto Rican inmate, loses his innocence and is driven to kill another inmate in order to save himself from the physical threats from other inmates.

In this thesis, I argue that both *Short Eyes* and *Oz* portray the dehumanizing identity transformation that happens as a consequence of incarceration. Miguel Piñero's experiences as a Puerto Rican immigrant in New York who was in and out of prisons for most of his life leads

him to pen a nuanced text that portrays violence in prisons. Piñero, in looking at the intricate social and racial underlying tensions that most of the American public does not know about, imbues his play with a self-reflective quality. In other words, *Short Eyes* is a play set in prison, written by a prisoner, which questions the place of prisons in society. At the end of the play, Piñero leaves the audience thinking about the role that prisons have in our societies, as they have a tendency to change individuals for the worse. Through this depiction, *Short Eyes* attempts to disrupt our society's growing penchant for using prisons as a catch-all solution for solving crime. *Oz*, on the other hand, scandalizes the transformation of individuals in prison by exaggerating the aggressive nature of the inmates that it portrays to the point of caricature. With the character Tobias Beecher, the series documents the metamorphosis that prisoners undergo within prison, yet the show does not disrupt or critique the dehumanization of inmates since the show depicts this through a sadistic and hyper-violent lens. This approach toward portraying the lives of prison characters by Fontana ultimately undermines any substantive attempt to disrupt the dehumanization of those same prisoners. The difference in the shift in tone toward the two similar subjects that are addressed by *Short Eyes* and *Oz* requires contextualization about the lives the authors lived and how their different experiences led to the creation of their works.

### **Literature Review: *Short Eyes***

Miguel Piñero, a Puerto Rican immigrant who moved to the United States at a young age, frequently penned works centered around his lived experiences as a Puerto Rican immigrant in New York. In a "Lower Eastside Poem," Piñero, writing on the theme of his own mortality, depicts that "A thief, a junkie I've been / committed every known sin" (*Outlaw* 4-5). His work often focuses on the "mean streets he knew best, populated by drug addicts and con men, pimps and prostitutes" ("*Miguel Piñero*"). For him, living in the ghetto, as he called it, was the natural

state of nature, as he wrote in “The Book of Genesis According to St. Miguelito.” In this poem, he states that “In the beginning / God created the ghettos & slums / and God saw this was good” (*Outlaw* 6-8). His love of the street included a proclivity for illegal behavior that included constant drug use, which landed Piñero in jail on more than one occasion. During one of his stays at Ossining Correctional Facility in New York, Piñero met Marvin Felix Camillo, the founder of The Family. Camillo’s Family was a theatre group composed mainly of former and current prison inmates that sought to provide current inmates with something meaningful and positive to engage in while in prison. To former inmates, The Family provided opportunities for work and a support system that helped decrease their chance at recidivism (“Marvin F. Camillo”).

Piñero and Camillo worked on several artistic projects together, including the publication of a poem titled “Black Woman with the Blonde Wig On,” which deals with themes of racial identity and the denial of one identity for a more socially advantageous one. The poem begins with the lines, “Black woman with the blonde wig on / you’re living an illusion” (*Outlaw* 11-13). Written before *Short Eyes*, this poem illustrates how the theme of racial identity has permeated throughout much of Piñero’s work (Piñero vii). Working on *Short Eyes* gave Piñero something to focus on while in Ossining, an outlet to channel his energies, and something that represented more than the “release date, forty dollars, and a suit” that inmates had to look forward to without the theatre (Camillo qtd in Piñero viii). The theatre represented a better high than the high that Piñero got from drugs. Camillo explains, “It was important for the members of The Family that they discover that you could get a better high off your creativity than off of any of those cold, unnatural, deadly chemicals that they were addicted to....” (qtd in Piñero x). While Piñero was never able to give up his drug use completely, having the theatre to occupy his idle hands, both



inside and outside of prison, proved to be a powerful outlet in Piñero's life. Failure to engage in a project larger than oneself, like the theatre, often led to recidivism.

Upon his release, Piñero joined Camillo's Family and worked on *Short Eyes*, living in an environment in which the play he was creating was viewed as "as if it were a masterpiece, a total experience" (Camillo qtd in Piñero xi). Their views were not very far off, as the play was critically acclaimed and outgrew the stage in the venue of its first production, the Riverside Church, and was soon produced in the Annenberg Center in Philadelphia, then on Broadway at the Lincoln Center in New York, and eventually in stages all over the world. For *Short Eyes*, Piñero earned the New York Drama Critics Award and two Obies (one for best American Play and one for Best Staging) for his "searing portrayal of violent prison life" ("Miguel Piñero").

Piñero's portrayal of prison life is dominated by the boredom that hides underlying racial tension and hostility. The playwright's depiction of prison experiences is one in which the "grinding banality, racial and political injustice, and simmering frustration of incarceration" (Bernstein 131) is interrupted by two moments of anxiety and violence. The cellblock in which the play takes place is divided along racial lines and the audience sees that there are two major factions. The African American contingent is made up of secular blacks and Muslim blacks, while the Latinos are made up of mainly Puerto Rican inmates. Wedged between these two groups are the whites, which are represented only by Murphy Longshoe, who is joined by Clark Davis. There is a very clear social hierarchy in prison, which is inversely correlated to the hierarchy that one finds outside of prisons. If whites make up the majority of the power structure in society, the inverse is true inside the dynamics that govern the day-to-day life in *The House of Detention*, the setting of the play. Here, we see that the black inmates named El Raheem, Omar, and Ice, along with the Latinos named Paco, Juan, and Cupcakes hold the positions of authority

within the walls of the prison. The white inmate Longshoe makes these power dynamics clear when he tells the newly arrived white inmate Davis that “Blacks go to the front of the line, we stay in the back... We’re the minority here, so be cool. If you hate yams, keep it to yourself” (Piñero 27). The inequitable division of power in the block keeps the peace, as Mr. Nett, the guard assigned to the cellblock, makes references to its relative stability when he tells Clark Davis that “This is a nice floor... a quiet floor... There has never been too much trouble on this floor... With you, I smell trouble” (29).

The trouble that the character Nett is foreshadowing is the trouble that will be caused by the introduction of Clark Davis, into an environment that is seemingly stable only on the surface. As a man with “short eyes,” or a pedophile, Clark Davis’s sexual transgressions prove to be the catalyst that brings the underlying racial animosity and tensions in the prison environment to the forefront of the play. Davis’s crime makes him the target of inmate violence, as short eyes are, “according to the prisoners, the most despicable form of criminal” (Piñero 126). Yet, Davis’s pre-prison identity as a wealthy white male makes him unable to acquiesce into this new subservient role to the blacks, browns, and even poor whites. The interracial tension that is caused by Davis filters into intraracial tension between each ethnicity. The instability of the question of what to do with Davis throughout the play leads to fighting between El Raheem and the other blacks, between Paco and Juan, between Paco and Cupcakes, and between Longshoe and Davis.

Davis is the vehicle through which Piñero explores the dehumanization of prisoners. Davis, as a dramatic character, has the purpose of showing the audience that an inmate is destroyed when he fails to develop a prison identity. By the play’s end, Clark Davis is murdered at the hands of members of each of the racial factions the cellblock. Furthermore, the play allows

Piñero to show his audience that, when the inmate is willing to change and acquiesce to the system, the formation of their prison identity will be one that is founded on the values that the prison setting posits as most important. One of these values is the ability to perpetrate violence on others and manipulate others for one's own good. For instance, Cupcakes sacrifices his humanity in order to avoid the sexual advances of Paco, but as a result, he loses who he was and metaphorically becomes "a part of these walls... an extra bar in the gate... to remain a number for the rest of [their] life in the street world..." (Piñero 120). Piñero confronts his audience with the reality that correctional facilities drive individuals to compromise their humanity in order to survive in prison.

### **Literature Review: *Oz***

*Oz* debuted in 1997 and ran through 2003 under the helm of Tom Fontana, the creator and head writer of the television series. *Oz* was originally pitched to Home Box Office (HBO) as a series about what happens to all the criminals caught in police procedurals. Chris Albrecht, head of original programming at HBO at the time, originally was not sure about producing a television series about prisons as he was not convinced audiences would be interested in this subject matter. Despite this, he gave Tom Fontana and Barry Levinson, *Oz*'s executive producer, a million dollars to shoot what eventually became a 17-minute pilot. Before leaving his office, Fontana and Albrecht engaged in a conversation in which Albrecht asked him, "What's the one thing you've always wanted to do in a pilot of a broadcast television show that you've never been allowed to do?" Fontana responded, "Kill the leading man." Albrecht exclaimed, "I love that! Do that! This conversation led to a pilot plot line that told the story of Dino Ortolani, a Italian inmate in Oswald Maximum Security Penitentiary (where the series takes place) who is ultimately burned to death by another prisoner at the end of the pilot episode. Albrecht

emphasized the need for creativity and made it very easy for Fontana to create exactly the kind of show that he wanted. Upon seeing the gruesome pilot, Albrecht ordered *Oz* to series (Sepinwall 20).

This was the kind of creative freedom that was revolutionary for the time. Whereas “there was layer upon layer of executives to get a new show on the air” (Delaney) at the larger broadcast networks, things were so informal at HBO that the process of creating and publishing work was more reminiscent of a pure, artist-driven creation that was unencumbered by the needs of business executives. Albrecht stated that at the time he considered himself “the closest thing to a television patron,” and that “through the ages, that’s how the best, purest art got made. You give people money and they paint. You don’t torture them with details. Not if you want brilliance. Not if you really need them” (qtd in Delaney). By allowing one man with one vision to represent it without having to worry about censors and about what a committee would think about his work, Albrecht allowed Fontana complete creative control over *Oz*.

Growing up in Buffalo, Fontana had always been fascinated with the Attica prison riots (Sepinwall 20), in which a group of 2,200 inmates in Attica, NY rioted and took over one of the prison blocks. Four days later, 1,000 armed police officers, guards, and National Guard servicemen opened fire on the inmates and reestablished control over the prison. In the end, 29 inmates and 10 guards were killed (Lohr). The administrative permissiveness of Chris Albrecht and the original programming executives at HBO provided the perfect vehicle for Tom Fontana to explore this childhood fascination with the Attica prison riots. HBO’s position as a subscription-based network also allowed Fontana to step outside the form and content lines that had previously characterized television shows of this nature.

HBO's subscription-based format meant that *Oz* would not have commercial interruptions. While most television shows up until *Oz* had been divided into different sections, "each ending in an artificial climax to allow for commercials," *Oz* instead was told in a one-hour episode that never slowed down. In essence, it forced its viewers to pay attention the entire time. The effect is a series that is "unsettling," as Fontana describes, yet "in a good way" (Smith). The format also allowed for ample time to be dedicated to the story arcs of each character. Fontana likened this formatting choice to the mode of telling short stories. He writes that he thought, "Why not make each episode like a little collection of short stories? Some weeks, the Beecher story would be five minutes, and some weeks it would be 15 minutes" (Sepinwall 24). This ability is attributed to the freedom afforded to Fontana by HBO, as we see that Fontana continued to state that "the freedom to be able to do it different every week, and decide what order they were coming in, was very liberating from a storytelling point of view" (Sepinwall 23). This experimentation with form conventions also extended into the characters that populate the show.

The series' main narrator Augustus Hill (played by Harold Perrineau) is also another feature of the program that is borne from creative spirit in which the show was conceived. Fontana's primary education was in a Jesuit school in Buffalo, New York. There, he was exposed to classic literature, like the works of Sophocles, Euripides, Aeschylus, and Shakespeare, along with the mythology of Edith Hamilton. Through this education in the classics, he developed an appreciation for the structures of classic theatre and created the character of Augustus Hill to represent the Greek theatrical trope of the chorus. In the show, Hill frequently interrupts the narrative scope of the show to poeticize on the major themes that are being depicted by the action in the show as he rotates and revolves around in a glass box as he

speaks to the camera. Fontana explains, “It really came out of the Greeks... and Greek tragedy, where you would have this chorus of somebody in the community who would step out and talk about themes and bigger ideas” (Sepinwall 22). Carolyn Strauss, Chris Albrecht’s top executive during his time as head of original programming, believed that devices like this made the series more like “black-box theatre, rather than the main stage” (Sepinwall 23). While it is an interesting and novel device, Hill’s character also provides the show with the ability to plainly and bluntly philosophize on the role of prisons and the consequences that they have in our society. In one particularly poignant monologue, he comments on the role of maleness and sexuality in prisons by stating that, “They call this the penal system,” he says, “but it’s really the penis system. It’s about how big, it’s about how long, it’s about how hard. Life in Oz is all about your dick and anyone that tells you any different ain’t got one.” These form-related aspects of the series allow it to better communicate themes that, until *Oz*, were considered to be too taboo for a television audience. While this metanarratological component of the series allows it to comment on the nature of prisons, the effectiveness of the critiques it delivers is ultimately hampered by the overall way in which the show depicts prisoners and their nature. Graphic, violent incidents end up overwhelming whatever philosophical lean the series might possess. The result is a product that appeals to the voyeuristic side of its audiences that crave to see extreme acts of human depravity.

At its core, *Oz* is a dark show about the nature of the human condition. Racial identification begins the conflicts that the audience sees, as inmates are paired up with an inmate of their race upon arrival at the Oz penitentiary. These pairings, based solely on race, do not always turn out well, as the audience sees that Tobias Beecher, an Ivy-league lawyer was pushed into the hands of Vern Schillinger, a white man who wanted nothing to do with him. As a

result, Schillinger makes Beecher into his slave, eventually reducing the pre-prison identity of the man to the point of near-extinction, leaving him as an emasculated shell of the man he used to be. Kathy Sweeney, an entertainment columnist for *The Guardian* writes that, “less about rehabilitation than about retribution, it’s probably the bleakest series ever produced, set in a dehumanizing world where every good deed is punished and all hope is cruelly, if imaginatively, extinguished” (“Your next box set: *Oz*”). The reason for the dehumanization that is portrayed here is the fact that the characters that are portrayed are involved in system of power that is always in flux. That is, in order to gain power within the prison community (or further solidify power that has already been attained), inmates are forced to betray one another and perpetrate acts of violence upon their fellow inmates.

The main theme of the series is the struggle for power and its effect on the lives of inmates. Sweeney writes that, a recurring theme of the show is the “struggle for power—over privileges, over drugs, over souls; Aryan vs. Muslim, Italian vs. Hispanic, idealistic bureaucrat vs. corrupt guard” (Sweeney) The cellblock that is depicted is one that is terribly fragmented along many divisions. The struggles mentioned above are just a few of the ones that are seen throughout the series. Homosexual vs. heterosexual, atheism vs. religion, white vs. black, privacy vs. transparency, god vs. devil, are others that are tackled by the show. The most important rivalry, the one that fuels virtually every conflict depicted on the show, is race and ethnicity: Aryan vs. Muslim vs. Italian vs. Irish vs. Hispanic vs. African American. *Oz* portrays that all of these groups cannot get along with one another when confined to a prison. Acts of violence, such as “smothering, torching, hanging, bludgeoning, crushing (by elevator), [and] poisoning with ground-up glass” (Sweeney) all occur because of the racial animosity that characterizes *Oz*.

It's difficult to narrow *Oz* into a single story line, as it aired for six years and accumulated countless parallel story lines. Most of the material that is discussed in this thesis, however, comes from the show's first season and concerns just a few characters. The reason for my focus on this particular season is that it most clearly depicts the processes of the dehumanization of the first-time inmate.. The beginning of the series is also (as the introduction to the show) where most of the mechanisms of inmate transformation are displayed to the audience, as most of the first season consists of expositions about the world that make up Oz. The series is set in the fictional Oswald Maximum Security Penitentiary (or Oz), in an experimental unit that has been nicknamed Emerald City. In this ward, inmates have increased freedom, but also relinquish some of their rights to privacy, as the ward represents "the latest in prison design," using "glass instead of bars, and video cameras for maximum surveillance. The unit is perpetually bathed in an antiseptic light" (Smith). During the show's first episode, we are introduced to Tobias Beecher. Fontana has described the character Beecher as the "HBO subscriber" ( qtd in Sepinwall 22), and the character remains for the rest of the show as an "instrument to calibrate the brutality in such a prison for viewers" (Zurawik). Beecher is the most relatable character in the television series, as the HBO audience, like Beecher, is mostly unacquainted with prison and is learning what it is like on the inside for the first time.

Despite a wealth of other story lines during season one, most of the audience is drawn to Beecher's story, as he is the one that goes through the greatest transformative change as the first season develops. After he arrives at Oz, he is befriended by Vern Schillinger, who, despite seeming friendly at first, wants to make Beecher into his sexual slave (*Oz* 1.01). Schillinger tricks Beecher into moving into the same cell as him (or pod, as they are called on the show); he then asserts his authority over him, branding his buttocks with the symbol representative of the



prison faction that he leads: a swastika. Throughout most of the first season, the audience sees how Schillinger gradually emasculates Beecher by raping him (1.03) and by making him dress as a woman and wear makeup (1.05); additionally, Schillinger also makes him tear pictures of his family and swallow pages from a law book, symbolically ridding himself of his past profession. In the sixth episode of the season, Beecher experiences a cathartic change after confronting the parents of the young girl he killed while drunk driving and decides that he will not stand for Schillinger's treatment anymore. High on PCP, Beecher throws a chair through the glass window that Schillinger stood behind, blinding him (*Oz* 1.06). In the next episode, once Schillinger is released from the infirmary, wearing an eye patch for an indeterminate amount of time, Beecher attacks him once again, knocking him out in the prison weight room, just to defecate on his face (*Oz* 1.07). In the season's finale, the prison explodes in a riot due to an underlying tension that has been developing, stemming from the loss of certain privileges, such as conjugal visits and the ability to smoke. During a riot that recreates the events of the Attica riots that fascinated Fontana when he was younger, Beecher is seen standing in the middle of the cellblock, dancing and playing an air guitar by himself in the middle of complete chaos. Ultimately, in *Oz*, Fontana portrays the process that changed Beecher's character from the mild-mannered lawyer from the first episode into a "madman capable of savagery that can't be described [in the pages of the Baltimore Sun]," as was put by David Zurawik, a television critic for the same newspaper. Beecher's transformation into a barbarous perpetrator of violence, Fontana argues with *Oz*, is a natural feature of the prison system, a system that each year grows larger.

### **The Expansion of the Prison-Industrial Complex**

Both texts are concerned with representing the effect of the prison-industrial complex on the psyche of prisoners, which becomes more prevalent and wide-spread with each new prison

that opens. The term “the prison-industrial complex” comes from Eric Schlosser and he describes it as “a set of bureaucratic, political, and economic interests that encourage increased spending on imprisonment, regardless of the actual need.” The prison-industrial complex contains representatives that are found in all areas of governance and economic institutions. Schlosser continues to add that

...it is composed of politicians, both liberal and conservative, who have used the fear of crime to gain votes; impoverished rural areas where prisons have become a cornerstone of economic development; private companies that regard the roughly \$35 billion spent each year on corrections not as a burden on American taxpayers but as a lucrative market; and government officials whose fiefdoms have expanded along with the inmate population.

The last emphasis on the expansion of the inmate population is important, as it is this expansion that Piñero and Fontana attempt to combat through the representations of prisons and prisoners that they present in their works. The prison-industrial complex is represented by these works in the buildings in which they are imaginatively set, the prison guards who keep them in line, the cafeteria workers who feed them, the secretaries that take care of the paper work that the prisoners need to be admitted and then released from prison. In short, anyone that seeks to make any sort of profit from the incarceration and subsequent care of these inmates is a part of the prison-industrial complex. This complex grows larger each year to keep up with the burgeoning expansion of the prison population.

The expansion of the prison-industrial complex began in the early 1960s, when the Supreme Court of Earl Warren passed legislation that, ironically, *increased* the rights of criminal suspects. A number of legal precedents were established by the courts during the Warren years,

but three were the most important: *Mapp v. Ohio*, *Gideon v. Wainwright* (uscourts.gov), and *Miranda v. Arizona* (McBride). Many liberals praised the decisions, arguing that they provided greater safety for those who were falsely accused of crimes and placed greater restrictions on police that might have abused their power. However, when crime rose drastically in the early 1960s, it was seen as a consequence of the legal decisions of the Warren Supreme Court. This led to many conservative politicians to criticize the court, claiming that the increased crime was a result of laws that were designed to defend criminals, rather than the victims of crime.

In the late 1960s, the political atmosphere pushed for stricter sentencing and less leniency toward criminals. This push resulted in legislation that placed much of the determination of when an inmate would be released in the hands of lawmakers, instead of “criminal agency professionals” who would decide when an inmate was rehabilitated enough to rejoin society (Pratt 21). This call received much support, as there was a growing fervor in this country for more transparent, simpler sentences—support was so great for this measure that it was promoted by both the conservative and the liberal camps. Conservatives wanted to move to standardized sentences because it would expand the prison sentences of most people convicted of crimes, satisfying their need for tougher laws. There was a small group of liberals that favored the indeterminate, rehabilitative sentences that were formerly in place, but most of them instead found themselves belonging to a group called “justice model liberals,” which favored uniform sentences as a way to “reduce the “discretionary authority of prison officials because they viewed them as agents of unfair coercive practices” (Pratt 22).

The move toward uniform, stiffer sentences for criminals was just one of the first signs that being “tough on crime” would soon become a political ploy, as much as an ideology. Many politicians benefitted from turning what had previously been seen as a local problem into a

national one. Barry Goldwater, who ran for the American presidency in 1964, was the first one who used crime as a main political platform. Hailing from Arizona, he walked into the Cow Palace in San Francisco and delivered a speech in which he warned criminals everywhere that he would make law enforcement a priority, stopping at nothing to “do all I can to see that a woman can go out on the streets without being scared stiff!” (Pratt 25). Goldwater did not win the presidency; in fact, he lost soundly to Lyndon Johnson. However, his defeat was “not to bury crime as an issue, but merely [to] transfer the official responsibility to the Democratic administration” (Gerald Caplan qtd in Pratt 25). The seed of the necessity of appearing tough on crime had been planted, and it continued to grow with subsequent administrations.

Piñero and Fontana write and portray the forgotten people of the pro-prison rhetoric. Since the 1980s, the number of prisons in operation in the United States has risen from under 600 to under 1,000 in operation today—and many of these prisons are operating over their original intended capacity (Lawrence and Travis 2). Politicians tend to forget that these prisons are populated by real people. Richard Nixon, during his 1968 presidential campaign used a similar approach to Goldwater, but ratcheted up his efforts with the help of television advertising. One of his ads, directed by Eugene Jones, illustrated the threat that crime posed to ordinary, law-abiding citizens. It featured an apparently wealthy, middle-aged woman walking down a dark street as she clutched her purse. As she walked down a dead street, a voiceover tells the audience that

Crimes of violence in the United States have almost doubled in recent years.

Today a violent crime is committed every sixty seconds. A robbery every two-and-a-half minutes. A mugging every six minutes. A murder every forty-three

minutes. And it will get worse unless we take the offensive. Freedom from fear is a basic right of every American. We must restore it (Bernstein 127).

The tough on crime stance, Nixon found, was so popular that he once wrote to former president Dwight Eisenhower that “I have found great audience response to this [law and order] theme in all parts of the country, including areas like New Hampshire where there is virtually no race problem and relatively little crime” (Pratt 25). In this case, he wasn’t voicing the demands and the wishes of the people: he was dictating them. The “race problem” is further distilled in the dictionary of one of his White House Chief-of-Staff, in which Bob Haldeman once wrote that Nixon told him that “you have to face the fact that the whole problem is really the blacks. You have to devise a system that recognizes this while not appearing to” (qtd in Pratt 25). The constant aggression toward the American underclass has continued over the years, as we see that our prisons are still populated by a disproportionate number of minority inmates. As future presidencies would prove, this stance on using crime in order to gain political favor would just grow more commonplace.

Nixon’s rhetoric about prisons was prevalent during Piñero’s time and set the tone of the conversation about prisons and the need for stricter laws and harsher punishments; this same tone was also voiced by subsequent administrations. In actuality, “tough on crime” rhetoric has become what Jonathan Simon refers to as a “significant strategic issue” that can be used by politicians who wish to appear to be acting legitimately by professing a fervor for crime deterrence. Politicians in the 1980s and the 1990s, like the politicians before them, appeared to be strong on crime. Ronald Reagan used Pat Brown’s opposition of the death penalty as a wedge issue in his run in the California gubernatorial race. In this term as president, he appointed Edwin Meese as the nation’s attorney general, who fought ardently for all the overturn of all legal

precedents about crime that were established during the Warren Supreme Court, stating that “Neither *Mapp [v. Ohio]* or *Miranda [v. Arizona]* help any innocent persons. They help guilty people” (Simon 57). George H.W. Bush attacked Michael Dukakis, his Democratic opponent during the 1992 presidential race, by making Dukakis look weak on crime. Bush linked Dukakis to Willie Horton’s furlough escape and subsequent rape of a woman during Dukakis’s tenure as Massachusetts’s governor. He also attacked him on his opposition of the death penalty. Jonathan Simon contends that Bush “laid out a vision of his presidency in which crime operated as a central problem” (Simon 57).

The pro-prison, anti-criminal stance continued well into the 1990s and meant that *Oz*, like *Short Eyes* before it, represented the prison industrial complex in a time during which prisoner rights and their well-being were secondary to an arbitrary notion of legality. Bill Clinton benefitted from heightened “tough on crime” rhetoric, as he was able to match Bush’s prosecutor-in-chief bravado by being from Arkansas, a state with the death penalty. During a New Hampshire primary contest in 1991, he even flew to Arkansas to make sure that he could preside over the execution of an Arkansas mentally-challenged inmate who had killed a cop. During his time in office, he signed and supported every single bill that extended punishments to prisoners and contracted their rights as prisoners (Simon 58-59). The consequences of those bills were the prisoners that Fontana put on the screen for his viewers.

The rhetoric of the American President sets the tone for the policy that will come out of its administration. Hence, their rhetoric doesn’t just end at political rallies—it has real consequences that affect lives of millions of Americans. Katherine Beckett’s research indicates that for most of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, public opinion was persuaded by the political rhetoric that was being broadcasted (Simon 22). In a democratic society, this is supposed to be

the opposite, as leaders are supposed to follow the will of the people, not create the will. Looking at our past in order to make sense of our future, we can see that unless there is a change in the discourse of prisons, pro-prison rhetoric will continue to overshadow structural issues that should be prioritized over an imagined sense of social decay.

*Oz* and *Short Eyes* portray the people who are removed from their families, their culture, and, ultimately, themselves in order to fuel the political and economic ambitions of the social elite. Piñero and Fontana attempt to put human faces to the misery that is caused by this nation's war on crime and expanding prison industrial complex. When *Short Eyes*' Juan tells Cupcakes that he has placed himself above understanding the dehumanizing nature of prison, he is talking to an audience that accepts the rhetoric that politicians feed them in order to fulfill their ambitions. Fontana also does his part to portray the problem, but the social fight is not as immediate for him, as he lacks the intimate experience with the system as does Piñero..

### **Theoretical Concepts**

Social identity theory and the notion of "The Program," which is an interracial code of conduct, provide a useful way of looking at the development of prison identities in the works of Piñero and Fontana. Social identity theory explains how individuals come to see themselves in terms of their race in prisons, and The Program explains how this racial identification has normative and regulatory consequences in the lives of inmates. In social identity theory, the self is seen as a reflective entity that can see itself as an object that can be categorized and classified. This classification usually occurs along a certain set of domains, such as race, sexuality, nationality, age, etc. This process, called *self-categorization*, is what leads to "an identity," the concept of who an individual sees him- or herself as. In *Short Eyes* and *Oz*, this identity is usually the result of an inmate's self-categorization of himself as a member of a race or ethnicity.

The reason for this categorization is that this is normally the first thing about an inmate that is recognized by the prison environment they enter. In *Oz*, prisoners are given mentors that belong to the same race, ignoring any other aspects that make them unique (1.01). This is standard practice in the Emerald City, as various episodes will show. In *Short Eyes*, Clark Davis's race is the first thing about him that is acknowledged when the inmates see him and tell another white inmate, Longshoe, that "one of [his] kin" has arrived (Piñero 24). By drawing a connection between inmates that have no similarities, save for their race, the prison systems in both *Short Eyes* and *Oz* begin a process of emphasizing the color of one's skin over any other characteristics (Stets and Burke 224).

The self that has been categorized as belonging to a certain group (in these works, a racial group) engages in associations with fellow members of the same set. This interpersonal association leads to the formation of a *social identity*, which is a "person's knowledge that he or she belongs to a social category of group" (Stets and Burke 225). When Tobias Beecher walks down the mess hall for the first time in *Oz* and sees that there are groups of white and black inmates, he acknowledges the fact that he is white by approaching one of the white tables first (1.01). Likewise, when Longshoe sees Clark Davis walk through the gate of their cellblock, he knows that, as a white man, he is in charge of acclimating a fellow white man to life in their prison (Piñero 24). By viewing their skin color as a commonality between them, people begin to form a conceptualization of "belonging" and "togetherness" along racial lines. However, by building bonds with people with a commonality, social identity theory states, people distance themselves from people that do not share that similarity (Stets and Burke 225). So, in prison, white inmates consider other white inmates as part of the in-group, a favored group of people who have something in common. While this can lead to positive interactions between like-



groups, it should be noted that these distinctions, according to social identity theory, can also result in antagonistic relations between unlike-groups. In this model of social theory, white inmates consider non-white inmates as part of the out-group, or an antagonistic group of people that do not share a commonality. Beecher's approach of the white mess hall table and Longshoe's approach of Clark Davis serve as an example of the dynamics that take place when someone is in the in-group. Examples of the out-group dynamics are seen when *Oz*'s Simon Adebisi (played by Adewale Akinnuoye-Agbaje), a black inmate, physically overpowers the white Beecher and steals his items, additionally implying the possibility of rape (1.01).

Categorization as a member of a group leads to a heightened sense of the similarities between oneself and members of the in-group, as well of the differences between oneself and members of the out-group. As a result of this categorization of individuals, the idiosyncratic qualities of individuals are suppressed in favor of a homogenized view of both people in the in-group and the out-group. Stets and Burke write that "social stereotyping is primary among the cognitive outcomes [of categorization]: researchers have found that stereotyped perceptions of in-group members and out-group members are enhanced and are made more homogeneous by identification with the in-group" (226). Through these stereotyped images, individuals begin the process of their dehumanization, as their individuality is eventually stripped by a racial system of identification in favor of their racial identity. If one is studying the effect of imprisonment on the development of dual identities, namely the pre-prison and prison identities, it's useful to recognize this moment of racial categorization as the moment in which the prisoner's pre-prison identity begins to slightly fade away. This thesis does not suggest that racialization is found only within prisons, as these two works themselves provide evidence of the contrary. However, I do

suggest that the racialization of inmates is amplified and becomes much more important within prisons.

The inmate's individualistic, pre-prison identity is made secondary to the prison identity, which leads to a racialized prison identity. In a world as racially divided as the prisons that are depicted by Tom Fontana and Miguel Piñero, we find that most inmate interactions are influenced by a strong sense of racial identity. For example, conversations between inmates of the same race are often depicted as personal, such as when Dino Ortolani (played by Tony Musante) talks about his wife to one of his Italian cohorts (*Oz* 1.4); however, when two inmates from different races speak to one another, the works show there is often the need to be careful about what one says, such as when El Raheem and Longshoe fight when El Raheem utters the words "white devil" when speaking to another black inmate (Piñero 18). One of the main themes of social identity theory is the study of how categorizing oneself as part of a group can have an effect on behavior and we see that this categorization often leads to the notions of ethnocentrism that tend to be depicted in Piñero and Fontana's depictions of prison life. The individual, once they belong to a category, sees him and his group as being so different to the people around them that the basis for community is almost non-existent. Also, having a certain social identity, or belonging to a certain group, has been shown to increase the likelihood of members of that group engaging in groupthink and "extreme concurrence" in the decision-making of a set (Stets and Burke 226). In short, identifying oneself as part of a group has the consequences of making oneself less individualistic and more as a stereotyped version of members of that group. In prison, the identification that prison inmates develop happens along racial lines and makes them more likely to engage in the stereotyped behavior of members of that racial group.

The “program” is a codified set of rules and regulations that help organize the social interactions that happen inside of prisons. But, because of the increased awareness of the role that race plays in structuring life behind bars in *Short Eyes* and *Oz*, we find that race plays a key role in the definition of these codes and regulations. Miguel Piñero, in the Glossary of Slang of the published version of his play, defines the program:

The do’s and don’ts of prison life. Programs are ethnically determined: they are different for whites, blacks, Puerto Ricans, etc. Programs are not enforced by the prison authorities: they are determined by the prisoners themselves. The program for the whole prison regulates the way in which members of different ethnic groups relate to one another in specific situations. It rigidly governs who sits with whom in the mess hall; where people sit in the auditorium; who smokes first; etc. It is the first thing a prisoner learns when he enters an institution. Failure to follow the program is a sure way to have trouble with fellow inmates and will result in physical reprisals— even death (Piñero 125-126)

His definition states that the rules of prison life are determined by ethnicity; that is, they are determined by race. Each race has a different set of rules to follow, which serves to increase the emotional distance between the members of each ethnic faction in prison. As an example of the inversion of the racial roles that are found outside of prison, if you are a white male in *Short Eyes*, you are expected to eat and stand in line behind the blacks. While this may seem to work to keep things calm, it is clear that this aspect of prison life has led to a lot of resentment from Longshoe, as he and El Raheem constantly engage each other in verbal and physical fights (Piñero 18). The rules of the program seem to maintain order, but also foster tension between each of the races.

The program can also lead to violent acts and the perpetuation of the threat of violence in the prison environment. *Short Eyes* depicts the centrality of ethnicity in everyday prison interactions caused by the program that forces one inmate to defend his honor by abusing and attacking another inmate. The fact that the program is so dependent on ethnicity is shown in *Short Eyes* to bind the social status of individuals to their race, making each individual a representative of that race in the eyes of the entire prison population. If a member of someone's race acts in a manner that is socially unacceptable, it is not only the social pariah's status and safety that is at stake, but also the status and safety of every member of that race. Hence, when an inmate like *Short Eyes*' Clark Davis is revealed to be a pedophile, (Piñero 126), it is the job of white inmates to discipline him, as it is their reputation that he is hurting. In Act One of *Short Eyes*, for example, Davis walks into the cellblock of the House of Detention and is greeted and welcomed by Murphy Longshoe. However, this welcome is quickly changed when it is made public that Davis is "a child rapist... a baby rapist" (30). Longshoe asks Davis, "Short eyes? Short eyes... Clark, are you one of those short-eyes freaks... are you a short-eyes freak?" He stresses the word freak because a freak is, by definition, an abnormal phenomenon... an aberration. He repeats it to tell the inmates present that the sexual deviance of Davis is in no way representative of his own identity as a white male. When Nett confirms that Davis is a pedophile, Longshoe accentuates the animosity he feels for Davis publically by spitting on his face as he and the other men exit the stage (30).

In *Oz*, like in *Short Eyes*, the program leads inmates to self-organize into hierarchies and create their own governing dynamics through the use the program. A simple glance at the many lunchroom scenes in *Oz* is enough to see the invisible hand of the program at work. Bare black heads, Muslim heads covered by kufis, white heads, gray haired heads, brown heads adorned by

bandanas are all seen in different clusters of the mess hall with little intermingling seen throughout. There is order here, but it is an order that is imposed on the prisoners by the prisoners themselves, as it is the inmates themselves that organize themselves into tables.

As the “first thing a prisoner learns when he enters an institution,” the program forces new inmates to face the reality that their survival in prison will be through their ability to appropriately comport themselves in a manner that satisfies their ethnicity’s program. So, when inmates seek to learn as much as they can about the prison in order to develop their prison identities as an “identity preservation [tactic]” (Schmid and Jones 419), the program is the knowledge that is used to inform their notion of what kind of identity is necessary in prison. After all, it is the dominant set of rules that is seen to regulate life in prison. The passing down of the program by one inmate to another is shown to happen in both works. In *Short Eyes*, it is very explicitly narrated to Clark Davis by Longshoe in the play’s first act. In *Oz*, Tobias Beecher learns this by watching the racial divisions that characterize the mess hall and the common areas in his cellblock (1.01). Because the program permeates through all social interactions in both works, it is considered the knowledge that informs every prisoner’s prison identity.

## **Chapter II Summary**

In Chapter II, “The Dual Prisoner Identity,” I use social identity theory to argue that *Oz* and *Short Eyes* depict the way in which inmates systematically lose their identities as individuals. When a prisoner enters into the prison in either work, their pre-prison identities are systematically destroyed and are supplanted by one that is created through racial identification. By mapping out how an individual’s identity is created in a social environment, we can see that when an inmate categorizes oneself as the member of one group (in this case an ethnicity) there is a profound effect on what they become. In essence, they begin to think of themselves more as

a member of a group and less as an individual. I also combine social identity theory with the work of Thomas J. Schmid and Richard S. Jones regarding the cognitive split that inmates undergo when they first arrive in a prison. In their article, “Suspended Identity,” these two scholars argue that when a new inmate enters prison, he develops two separate identities as a survival strategy. The first identity is who they perceived themselves to be prior to incarceration; the second identity is a pseudo-identity that is created based on their observations of what constitutes proper prison behavior. I suggest that the work of Tom Fontana and Miguel Piñero portrays this identity change through the characters of Tobias Beecher and Clark Davis, respectively.

Clark Davis, as a white and wealthy individual, is accustomed to a certain amount of social power (or agency in social interactions), but the cellblock tries to condition him into fitting the social status that befits his role as a “short eyes,” or pedophile. When he enters, the other inmates make it very clear that, in prison, he will be the victim of the sexual abuse that he perpetrated on a number of young girls. However, Clark Davis, because of the social status he had outside of prison, is not used to being in a submissive position in any relationship. He makes this clear to the inmates that abuse him and refuses to submit. As a result, he is murdered. The play therefore shows that Clark Davis was not able to develop the subjective prison identity that the other inmates demanded that he became.

*Oz*’s Tobias Beecher, on the other hand, is able to develop a prison identity in order to guarantee his survival in prison. When he enters, he forms a relationship with Vern Schillinger. Because of his race, he seems to Beecher as a logical association. However, when Schillinger proves to be a brutal sadist, Beecher learns that he has to conform to the role of “prag,” or sex slave in order to survive in prison. Defying Schillinger and breaking away from his would mean

sure death, so Beecher decides to let go of his notions of masculinity and pride and submit to Schillinger. Beecher develops into a submissive prison identity, allowing himself to become Schillinger's sex slave. But, this is only the first of two evolutions of Beecher's prison identity. In the end, Schillinger's abuse proves to be too much and Beecher fights back, showing that he has learned the value of violence in asserting oneself in prison. He blinds Schillinger and abuses him horribly. At the close of the first season of the television series, Beecher has transformed into a violent individual capable of extreme violence—his final prison identity.

### **Chapter III Summary**

In Chapter III, "Race, the Program, and the Prison Identity," I examine the way in which the program helps shape the prison identities of inmates. Because of the program's nature as a racially-determined concept, it posits race as the most important characteristic of an individual. I argue that the two works elucidate how the program establishes a set of intraracial and interracial social dynamics that ultimately trigger the formation of an individual's prison identity, which is the mechanism through which individuals are dehumanized.

In *Oz*, a race-based mentorship system is the reason that Tobias Beecher was ever in a position to allow himself to be abused by Vern Schillinger. These race-based pairings, though, are only the first instance in which the program's emphasis on race is seen to influence life in *Oz*. Everywhere one looks, the program's influence is seen. So, when Beecher was already in Schillinger's control, he was unable to do anything to break out of it, as Schillinger is the head of the largest white faction in the prison. The safety provided by Schillinger's white contingent made up for the abuse that he had to suffer at Schillinger's hands. Even Beecher's violence that marked the end of his transformation into his prison identity is read as an internalization of the language of violence that is perpetuated by the program.

In *Short Eyes*, Piñero explores the theme of intraracial lust in order to analyze the role of the program in the creation of prison identities. The characters that Piñero portrays do not forcefully assert their power over one another the same way that *Oz*'s Schillinger does. Yet, lust makes its way on to the stage of *Short Eyes* in the form of sexual aggression. This fear of this aggression drives Cupcakes to use racial identification in order to condone Paco's sexual aggression toward him, an inmate of the same race. By pointing out that Paco is, in fact, betraying his own race and acting out against the rules of the program, Cupcakes manages to refocus the inmate's aggression toward a more suitable target, Clark Davis. Through his manipulation of race, Cupcakes becomes, essentially, the instigator of the events that led to the death of Clark Davis. Piñero's stance on the role of the program in turning ordinary prisoners into the instigators of murder is clear in the play's last scene, in which Juan tells Cupcakes that he has allowed the prison to change him and allowed his fear of Paco's aggression to "steal [his] spirit" (Piñero 121).

Given the different historical contexts that frame these two works, it's remarkable that they depict such similar themes. The core themes of both *Short Eyes* and *Oz* rest in dissecting and displaying the result of the pro-prison rhetoric that has characterized American society for the past forty years. Starting with Goldwater in the sixties, and continuing into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the American prison has grown into a system that does not rehabilitate its inmates. Rather, it transforms them into the very people that our politicians claim to be saving us from.



## CHAPTER II

### THE DUAL PRISONER IDENTITY

Entry into prison as a first-time inmate constitutes a major event in an individual's life. Upon entry, he is asked to leave behind his family, friends, and other facets of his life that provided him with the concept of who he is. As such, it is a time of uncertainty and fright—a time in which the individual will be forced to reflect upon the actions that led him to this place, as well as a time in which he will ask harsh questions of himself and how he has found himself here. This self-dialogue marks the beginning of a diverging process in which two separate identities will arise: the first, the concept of who he was prior to incarceration (known as his pre-prison identity); the second, a façade that the new inmate will portray to the prison world as a self-defense tool and a way of preserving his pre-prison identity intact.

Clark Davis from Miguel Piñero's play *Short Eyes* (1974) and Tobias Beecher from Tom Fontana's *Oz* (1997-2003) are characters whose identities are changed by prison. These texts both represent the experiences of first-time inmates and show how the prison experience can transform individuals through a process of dehumanization and endemic violence. Clark Davis is the main narrative device of Piñero, a man who experienced prison first-hand several times during his life and actually wrote the play while serving a prison sentence in Ossining Correctional Facility in New York. Because Piñero knows the "massive assault" that prison can present to the identity of inmates (Schmid and Jones 415), he presents a complex perspective of inmate transformation. His depiction of the process is one in which his representative of the first-time inmate, Clark Davis, fails at developing a façade that allows him to successfully navigate

prison interactions. *Oz* was created by someone much different from Miguel Piñero: Tom Fontana. An established figure in the television industry and someone who never experienced prison himself, Fontana was “fascinated” with the Attica prison riots as a child (Sepinwall 20). Fontana turned his childhood fascination with prison culture into a simpler version of the struggle of the individual versus the transformative powers of prisons. Using Beecher he shows that, while a prisoner can adapt and allow the prison experience to change him, this can have terrible consequences for prison inmates.

Both works are set in environments that induces transformative change through the violence that characterizes life in the prisons depicted in *Short Eyes* and *Oz*. *Short Eyes* is about the introduction of a social pariah, a white child molester, into a prison cellblock that already struggles with underlying racial tensions. His entry serves as a catalyst for a dangerous mix of repressed anger and frustration. *Oz* is set inside of the fictional Oswald Maximum Security Penitentiary (called Oz in the show) and consists of many different story lines. However, the main narrative of the show’s first season concerns the rivalry that develops between Tobias Beecher, a white middle-class attorney who is serving a prison sentence for killing a girl while drunk driving, and Vern Schillinger, the sadistic leader of the prison’s chapter of the Aryan Brotherhood. Beecher’s adaptation to prison might allow him to survive in an environment as brutal as The Oswald Maximum Security Penitentiary, but this comes at a great cost: he loses himself.

In this chapter, I argue that *Short Eyes* and *Oz* – through their focus on the characters Davis and Beecher – both expose the correctional facility’s power to destroy an individual’s identity and supplant it with an identity that is formed in prison. Both Davis’s and Beecher’s pre-prison identities perish: one is literally destroyed, while the other’s identity is destroyed

metaphorically. As *Short Eyes* and *Oz* demonstrate, the development of the prison identity is so essential to the survival of the first-time inmate that the consequences of failing to develop this are severe. Both of these works feature the introduction of an unwanted individual into the prison environment, who, due to socioeconomic factors is required to create a separate identity to survive in prison. The rejection of this fact leads to the physical demise of one, while the acceptance of this fact allows the other to survive.

### **Constructions of the Self in Prisons**

Social identity theory provides a useful way of looking at the way that prison identities develop in the work of Miguel Piñero and Tom Fontana. Social identity theory explains the way in which individuals come to see themselves in terms of their race in prisons. This theory explains how conceptualizations of the self are informed by the social circumstances in which an individual develops his identity. Through this formation of the self along particular markers, like race and sex, individuals gain not only a concept of themselves, but also develop behavioral tendencies.

In social identity theory, an identity is the result of a process of self-categorization. This process is the distinguishing of oneself along the markers of race, sexuality, nationality, sex, etc.. This classification usually occurs along a certain set of domains, such as race, sexuality, nationality, age, etc. In *Short Eyes* and *Oz*, the dominant marker for this process of distinction from others is race, as it is the first thing that is noticed and acknowledged about a new inmate.

This concept of self then leads to the formation a concept of self in its relation to others. The result of distinguishing an individual according to race is the formation of a *social identity*. This group identity is defined as a “person’s knowledge that he or she belongs to a social category of group” (Stets and Burke 225). By viewing their skin color as a commonality between

them, people begin to form a conceptualization of “belonging” and “togetherness” along racial lines. Identification of oneself according to race can create bonds in the intraracial group, but also leads to tension between interracial groups. By building bonds with people from the same race, social identity theory states, people distance themselves from others who do not share that commonality (Stets and Burke 225). The end result of this is an environment in which intraracial bonds are heightened and augmented at the expense of the greater, interracial community. The gradual stripping of the prisoner’s pre-prison identity begins with the identification of the prisoner as part of a racial group instead of a unique individual. The idiosyncratic qualities of individuals are suppressed in favor of a stereotyped view of both people in the intraracial group and the interracial community-at-large (Stets and Burke 226). When an individual begins to look at himself as a stereotyped version of what a white man must act like in prison, he is suppressing the parts of him that made him who he was outside of his incarceration. The denial of a being’s individuality is one of the core features of the concept of dehumanization, as an individuality differentiates one person from another. In *Short Eyes* and *Oz*, human beings often have to sacrifice their individuality in order to survive.

### **The Dual Nature of the Prisoner**

In “Suspended Identity: Identity Transformations in Maximum Security Prisons,” Thomas J. Schmid and Richard S. Jones study the process through which first-time prisoners modulate the deep contrasts between the world they are leaving when they walk into prison and the world they are moving into. The creation of a dualistic self is, according to them, a survival strategy that allows a prisoner to maintain the essence of who they perceive themselves to have been prior to incarceration while also being able accommodate to their new environment (419). When the characters of Clark Davis and Tobias Beecher are introduced to the audience, one can

see that these men are being bombarded with a number of crises at the same time. Some of these, in *Short Eyes* and *Oz*, include questions about the well-being of the inmates' families, the inmates' rationales for having committed his crime, the perceived injustice they are being made to suffer through, the preconceived fear of the new environment, etc. At this moment of uncertainty about the future, the first-time prisoner looks to the past. The felon, in this case, formulates [a self-image]... through a running self-dialogue, a heightened state of reflexive awareness through which he ruminates about his past behavior and motives..." (418). The formulation of who the inmate was and why he did what he did is done so to create what amounts to a "still shot" of who that person is at this point of departure into a dangerous environment. Schmid and Jones write that prison is seen by the real-life inmate as a place in which he is in "danger of changing in prison, either through the intentional efforts of rehabilitation personnel or through the unavoidable hardening effects of the prison environment" (417). The prisoner's pre-entry perception of prison, because of the emphasis on violence that the prisoner perceives as characterizing it, drives the prisoner to enter into a state of emergency. The dangers of this environment are not only of bodily harm, but the prisoner feels that the essence of who he is, the very core of his identity, is also at stake.

There is a need to maintain control and, because of the uncertainty about the upcoming trials of a new inmate, inmates harken back to a time in their lives in which they still had control over their actions—a move toward the pre-prison stage of their lives. Only this is an impossibility and the individual is left with a self-dialogue of questions: questions of himself to himself about the actions that led the new prisoner to this place. In a series of interviews with recent arrivals to maximum security prisons conducted by Schmid and Jones, there are two

themes that stand out: the shock at the total loss of control the inmate is experiencing and concerns about safety (418).

In an effort to retain control and improve safety, the prisoner, “self-insulates” himself from his surroundings (Schmid and Jones 418). Acting on survivalist instincts that favor distance and retroactivity instead of contact and proactivity, the first-time inmate places physical, intellectual, and emotional distance between himself and the other prisoners. Despite the fact that the very setting in which they find themselves serves as a unifying bond between the new inmate and his cohorts, he still sees the other prisoners as “hostile, alien beings, with whom he has nothing in common.” Because of this, he develops an “anticipatory survival strategy that consists primarily of protective resolutions; a resolve to avoid all hostilities; a resolve to avoid all nonessential contacts with inmates and guards” (Schmid and Jones 417). The ability to distance oneself from prison and the other prisoners does not last very long, as the close quarters a prisoner is kept in and the social norms of prison, such as the emphasis on constant racial bonds, make isolation difficult. Moreover, as an individual learns that their perception of prison is based on misconceptions that are popularized by pro-prison rhetoric, he starts to realize that he must interact with others in order to gather information about the prison world (Schmid and Jones 419). It isn’t long before an inmate learns that real prison life is not made up of one brutal murder after another, but it is rather made up of brief moments of violence interspersed between long periods of mundane boredom. To learn more about his environment, the new inmate reaches out to fellow inmates, throwing himself into a moment of crisis: belonging versus not belonging and isolation versus incorporation are a few of the conflicting forces at work inside the prisoner. A dual identity allows the prisoner to compartmentalize his being and become two different people that are relevant in different contexts.

### Clark Davis's Failure

Miguel Piñero frequently collided with police during his youth and served several prison sentences during his life, including one for armed robbery during which he was introduced to prison theatre programs. His play was borne out of his need to escape the mundaneness of prison that he experienced during the majority of his life. It is a serious work that asks its audience to “consider the relativism of morality, the public complicity in the prison system, and the cathartic potential of prison theatre” (Bernstein 133). Edward Wright breaks up the components of play scripts generally into three different elements: substance, form, and technique (12-13). Substance is what the author is trying to say, form is what form the message is conveyed through, and technique is the way in which he structures the play and the messengers that deliver his message. The substance of *Short Eyes* is complex enough that one can get different answers depending on the lens through which it is read, but regardless of the reading, the deliverers of the play’s message are the strong characters that Piñero creates. It is through these characters that the reader is able to discern the substantive message of the creation of a prison identity. Piñero’s life experience as a Puerto Rican immigrant, his life as an American, and his introduction into the prison system allow Piñero a special vantage point from which to describe the formation of prison identities. As a result of these lived experiences, the text shows us that it’s not always easy to let go of one’s pre-prison identity and form a second prison identity, especially when there are socioeconomic differences that are as large as the ones that we see in his play.

The prison world of *Short Eyes* is one in which the normal social order that one would experience on the outside has been reversed. The racial proportion in prisons of whites, blacks, and Hispanics is close to a mirror opposite of the same groups on the outside; that is, in prisons, blacks and Latinos make up a large majority, while whites are proportionally underrepresented.

This sheer numerical advantage has led to a reversal of the power structure that normally rules the social dynamics on the outside. So, when Clark Davis enters the prison, a fellow white inmate named Murphy Longshoe feels the need to explain the unfamiliar prison hierarchy, stating that “Blacks go to the front of the line, we stay in the back,” alluding to the social inferiority of whites in prison. Furthermore, he also states that “spics” sometimes serve as an ally to the whites because they get a “big brother attitude about the whites in jail.” In this sentence, Piñero further reinforces the dependency of whites in jail to races that might be considered to be socio-economically inferior in a non-prison context. However, Longshoe continues to state that this union is a tenuous one, as there “ain’t no guarantee” that the white inmates will always have that Latino support (Piñero 28).

In the 1997 film version of the play (directed by Robert Young) the marginalized position of the relative power hierarchy of whites in prison is further reinforced in the common room scenes because the whites participate in the sing-along and verbal community-building activities that are led by the blacks and Latinos. As Jon Rossini states, “white men are the minority in this world, which means their very existence rests on a precarious negotiation between two much larger groups, African Americans and Puerto Ricans” (Rossini 34). Signaling a situation that starkly contrasts the relative position that white men experience on the outside of prison. Clark Davis, as symbol of white American power and privilege, is unaccustomed to negotiating the persona he portrays to the world according to the wishes of minorities that he considers to be socio-economically below him. However the world in prison is also very different from the world to which he is accustomed. The uneasiness with which Clark Davis moves around the cell block is a clear indication he has no way of engaging with the men of color around him. Even



though the size of the stage restricts Clark and the inmates that surround him, the large disparity in their socioeconomic level leads to a huge chasm that he is unable to cross.

Piñero portrays Clark Davis's first interaction with the other inmates as a scene in which his white privilege and notions of power are forcefully wrestled away from him. When Clark first enters and hears that his alleged crime has been announced to the whole block, he is unable to fend for himself verbally or physically. When Longshoe expresses the way the block feels about Davis and his status as a child molester by spitting on his face, Davis passively accepts this retributive gesture and doesn't do anything. Then, when Nett foreshadows Davis's future at the end of a knife held by an inmate ("The men up there know what to do with a degenerate like you" [Piñero 30]), the only answer that Davis can answer is a meek "I... I...", an answer whose syntax is a metaphor for his state in the prison hierarchy: an object without an action, a subject without a verb. This symbolism fulfills one of the key features of theatre according to those who argue that "the stage is by nature a symbolic place" (Kerman 17). This moment helps cement Piñero's position as a dramatist, rather than just a chronicler of prison life, which he also doubly fulfills. The deference that Clark Davis shows to the environment around him is further cemented by the way that Piñero structures most of the dialogue that he attributes to Clark in the ensuing scenes. Davis frequently answers Juan's questions with vague answers, which, while it seems to give the audience clues about Davis's guilt, also signal Davis's unwillingness to wholeheartedly engage in the system that he is in (Piñero 32-38). Davis, a symbol of white America, even when placed inside a prison and confronted with prisoners (including one that seems to be friendly toward Davis), is unwilling to see himself as one of them. His experience as a white, middle class male has been one in which he's enjoyed a control over his life and is unwilling to relinquish this in prison, despite the initial displays of deference.

Piñero's uses Clark Davis to represent a power that transcends the limits of the stage. Clark Davis represents the "colonial rape of Puerto Rico by the United States" (Rossini 36), an allusion to Puerto Rico's status war prize given to the United States as a result of the 1898 Spanish-American War. Piñero suggests that Davis is accustomed to being able to assert his power as a white, upper-middle class male, which, in Davis's logic, allows him to violate the law without worrying about the consequences of his actions. Davis displaces the violence of his crimes into the colored bodies of the girls he molested, rationalizing that he is absolved of any guilt because the girls were "easy" and seemingly willing participants in the sexual acts (Rossini 37). Davis's description of his first act of molestation is described in a way that implies that he did not struggle at all to molest his sister's friend (Piñero 36), and the other incidents he describes also seem to exude a calm, quiet confidence that shows evidence of Davis's sense of ownership over his victims. His sexual victories are race-based, as he describes that the easiest victims were the "Puerto Ricans and the black girls," who he would molest even in their own home if their parents were out," symbolizing not only a personal conquest, but also one of conquest of a territory, creating a parallel between his own sexual conquests in which he feels he is welcomed to the bodies of these girls and the United States' perception of being welcomed into Puerto Rico after their victory over Spain in 1898. However, his conquests are also economic, as he states that "little white [girls] would masturbate you in the park for a dollar or a quarter... depending on how much emphasis their parents put in their head of making money" (Piñero 38), suggesting a freedom granted to him by his financial means.

Piñero does not suggest that Clark Davis's status as a white male became relevant only when he entered prison. On the contrary, it was Davis's whiteness that allowed him to prey on young girls when he was free. The racialization that Davis goes through as a part of the

formation of his prison identity is one that simply amplifies the racial identification that already characterizes Davis. On the outside, he preyed on children because of the agency afforded to him as a wealthy white male. Inside, he will be preyed upon because he molested children. Clark Davis's experience inside of prison, therefore, is one that is a direct result of a racialized identity. Davis's transformation into his prison identity is just another manifestation of racialized identities.

Piñero creates a complex contrast between the person that Clark Davis was before he entered prison and the person that he has become while in prison. He does this by placing the scene in which he confesses his predatory behavior to Juan between two scenes in which Clark Davis is seen as the prey of the predatory behavior of the prison institution, represented by Longshoe, Paco, El Raheem, and Nett. The first prey scene is the one listed above in which Longshoe spits on Davis after Nett announced his crime. the second scene in which Davis is portrayed as the prey is the scene in which the inmates return to the common room and begin bullying Davis around the room, claiming that he cannot stand in "their" space (Piñero 43-44). While one might think that the position of the white, middle-class male Clark has been established based on the first interaction that Davis had with the other inmates, Piñero shows us that some habits are hard to break. Davis, angry about his treatment, proceeds to confront the men who are harassing him in Act II.

In this act we see that the status that Clark Davis's prison identity clashes with the prison identity that the other men want to impose on him, the prison identity of a pedophile. This position is the lowest, most vulnerable position in the prison hierarchy, according to Piñero (126). The contrast between the powerful position he commanded when he preyed on young girls and the position that the other men force him into proves to be too much for Davis to overcome.

Following the harassment by the prisoners in Act I, Clark Davis implores his power and skewed perception of morality and announced that he “will not stand for this treatment,” referring to the treatment he is receiving from the other inmates. In this moment, Davis is harkening back to a time in his life when he had the power to make such pronouncements—a time in his life when he held enough power to determine the outcome of situations. Given what Piñero has told us about Davis, we know that the time in his life when he’s displayed that much power over anything was when he sought and abused the children he molested. After his denouncement of his treatment at the hands of the other prisoners, we see that Piñero’s representation of those who populate the prison system fight back and carry out their own form of punishment on Clark Davis’s body by dunking his head into an unclean toilet bowl.

The socioeconomic status and privilege enjoyed by Davis has led to a pre-prison identity that is very far removed from the environment in which Davis finds himself in *Short Eyes*. Although he is used to being in control, he is left in an environment in which he will experience a complete loss of control because all the features of the social dynamic system that afforded him his liberties and his position of power in society are gone. In the prison, he is nothing more than a child molester, even though his guilt, although apparent from his confession to Juan, has not even been established under the eyes of the law. The very legality that appropriated him with safety is absent in the environment of the prison, as we see that it is ultimately the inmates, working through their own sense of morality and right and wrong, that take it upon themselves to administer the justice that the system appears to be unwilling or unable to administer. The self-dialogue that goes through Davis’s mind is not unlike the one described by a new inmate’s interview in the study of the dual nature of prisoners titled “Suspended Identity,” in which the new inmate remarks that in the transfer from the courthouse to the prison, all he could think

about was the “total loss of control” that he would now have to subjugate himself to (Schmid and Jones 418). In the interviews conducted by Schmid and Jones, we can see that the helpless feeling that goes along with being moved into a prison is a common one and one that serves to unite the experience of different first-time inmates. Piñero, who was once a first-time inmate in a prison institution, is apparently aware of this feeling and tries to depict it in the character of Clark Davis. Here, Davis, a symbols of white privilege, is faced with an environment that will strip away all agency from them and because of this, needs to develop a secondary identity that can safeguard their pre-prison identity, much like Piñero did at one point.

All of Davis’s notions about structure and hierarchy break down when he enters prison, the first of which is his belief in the rule of law. As a white male, Davis has been conditioned to trust in the law to protect him, even as he worked outside of it during his molestation episodes. The reader and viewer can see this in both the play and the film version, as we see that when Davis is faced with an angry mob of prisoners who threaten him, he threatens them back with repercussive legal action, which we see near the end of Act II. Clark Davis is being threatened by Paco, Ice, and Longshoe—the first two, minorities that Clark Davis holds a relative power advantage against outside of the prison system; the last, a minority inside the prison system that holds a power advantage against him, anyway. He feverishly calls for Nett, the emissary of the law in their prison block, to come to his aid: “Mr. Nett! Mr. Nett!” he yells, but he is ignored when Nett turns away and leaves him to deal with the other three prisoners. Disgusted at the situation he finds himself— that is, without the help of the law and subservient to the minorities that he considers himself to be superior to—Davis explodes into an indignant rage that proves to be his death warrant. He yells, “Go ‘head, do what you want. Go ‘head, you filthy bastards. Go ‘head, Mr. Nett, don’t think you can walk away from this. I’ll tell the captain. I’ll bring you all

before the courts. You bastards...” (Piñero 94). Lost to Davis in the middle of this angry diatribe is the fact that the prisoners and Nett have no intent in allowing Davis the opportunity to see the captain or accuse them in front of the courts. He ardently hangs on to this belief, even though it should have been clear to him that the law he believes and trusts no longer applies in prison because it is Mr. Nett, a correctional officer, who violates Davis’s right to privacy and announces to everyone on the block Davis’s crime, initiating the chain of events that result in Davis death. It is also Davis’s legal threat that essentially forces Nett, acting with Davis’s fellow inmates, to murder Davis on the pretense of “self-defense” after Davis threatens to tell Captain Allard of the devious actions that Nett has undertaken against Davis. Nett begins the chain of events that lead to the prisoners holding the knife by Davis’s throat, but it is Davis himself that forces the hand of Nett and the others by threatening them with legal action.

The play and film depict how in the time between Davis’s introduction to the cell block and his death, he was given several opportunities to settle into a prison identity that was befitting of his status as a “short eyes.” However, his adherence to a pre-prison identity that positioned him as being above the other inmates, kept him from developing a prison identity even as all remnants of agency were being stripped from him. Longshoe attempts to begin the dual identity process as soon as he finds out where Davis will fit into the prison hierarchy by spitting in his face (Piñero 30) and by bumping into Davis as he exits the room (Piñero 31). Juan warns him that staying on this cell block is “committing involuntary suicide” (Piñero 39); Omar, Ice, El Raheem, and Cupcakes take turns bullying Davis around the common room (Piñero 43); Longshoe takes Davis to hold his penis while he urinates—then, when Davis refuses, points out that while he is above doing that, he is not above “[raping] seven-year-old girls” (Piñero 47). Shortly after, Longshoe forces Davis to hand over a gold chain, an accessory that fits the suit he

has been wearing since he entered the prison which makes him stand out amongst the inmates. When Davis once again refuses to live in, Longshoe sarcastically appeals to their bond as white men before leading the other men to ram Clark's head into a "piss-filled toilet" (Rossini 39).

The play shows how Davis's arrogance leads to a stubborn inability to adapt to the social hierarchy in to which he is now confined. The color of his skin and his father's money do not allow him to engage in the "self-dialogues" that are necessary to continue the process of creating a survivalist prison identity, leaving him as a piece that will never fit into the puzzles that are prison dynamics. By refusing to acknowledge the bond between him and the other prisoners, Davis maintains the prison identity that believes in the legal recourse of the white, upper-middle class male and it is this identity that must engage the rest of the prison population. The ultimate consequence of his failure to adapt to a dual prison identity is the death of Clark Davis at the hands of the two main structures that Davis relied on: the law, which no longer applies in prison power dynamics and is represented by Mr. Nett; and his skin color, represented by Longshoe.

### **Beecher's Tenuous Success**

The creation of the television series *Oz* was not one that was borne out of the sensory depravity that a prisoner experiences when in prison, but rather it was created through conversations between Tom Fontana and Chris Albrecht, the head of original programming at HBO during the 1990s (Sepinwall 19). In fact, the project was made "almost as a lark" that was seen as more of an interesting project than anything that would approach the solemn severity of Piñero's *Short Eyes*. That is, the series is structured much like any other television series, in which each episode follows the normal rules of drama; that is, it has the elements of exposition, inciting moment, turning point, climax, and ends by including some elements of resolution (Wright 51-52). While a "well-made" play will address all of these, television shows usually

favor the inciting moment, turning point, and climax, while allotting less time to the exposition elements and even less to the resolution (Wright 53). However, *Oz* is heralded as the first episode of a revolution of what could be considered a television revolution (Sepinwall 19) and, as such, included several devices that made it different from the standard fare of television dramas. Chief among these is the inclusion of a wheel-chair bound narrator named Augustus Hill (played by Harold Perrineau) who would provide insight into the philosophical implications of the on-stage action and add a level of introspection into each episode that was, until then, unseen in television.

The inclusion of this device, as well as the freedom that Fontana was afforded in the creative direction of his show, made Carolyn Strauss, an HBO executive that worked with Chris Albrecht and Tom Fontana during the taping of *Oz*, refer to the television series as a “black box theatre, which “gave people a tremendous sense of freedom and experimentation, and just a great sense of, ‘You know what? We can try it. It’s not going to be the end of the world if something doesn’t work’” (qtd in Sepinwall 23). Fontana, already well-established in the entertainment community after several successful television shows, therefore had total and complete freedom in the creative aspects of this show and was only burdened by the imagination of he and his writers. Tom Fontana’s background in television writing came together with an interest in the workings of prison life (he became very interested in prisons after the Attica Riots near his home in Buffalo as a child) and he wrote a television series that was aimed at both entertaining and a forcing HBO subscribers to “confront the dehumanizing nature of the prison experience” (Sepinwall 25). The result of this union became something that explores similar themes as Piñero’s *Short Eyes*, but with a much more violent and extravagant flair.



Fontana and Piñero both create characters that are meant to represent a section of the American audience that is unfamiliar with the inner workings of prisons. In *Short Eyes*, this role is fulfilled by Clark Davis; in *Oz*, it is fulfilled by Tobias Beecher. The background that the two authors establish for their characters are similar: both characters are around the same age, both are white, and both come from similar socioeconomic circumstances. Davis claims that his father has “plenty” of money (Piñero 94), and Beecher is the son of a prominent lawyer and is a lawyer himself (1.01). However, there is a crucial difference between the two: Miguel Piñero’s attitude toward Clark Davis is one that suggests that Davis represents a sense of white privilege that cannot be assimilated into the prison environment, while Beecher represents, in Fontana’s words, the “HBO subscriber” and was meant to serve as a point-of-view character for the audience. Piñero’s tone toward Davis seems to be adversarial, while Fontana’s attitude toward Beecher is protective. Because of this, the two characters are written into very different futures, as Davis’s role in *Short Eyes* ends with his destruction at the hands of the prison, while Beecher is shown to grow into someone that is able to traverse the perilous currents of Oz.

When Beecher first enters Oz, he is given a “mentor” in the form of Dino Ortolani, who’s only “slice of advice” is “get yourself a weapon” and “don’t smile... ever” (1.01). When Ortolani’s approachability turn out to be suspect, Beecher allies himself with Vern Schillinger, who earns Beecher trust by pretending to be protecting Beecher from Simon Adebisi, who has made forceful sexual advances toward Beecher. Beecher moves into Vern Schillinger’s cell, or “pod,” and learns that Schillinger’s intentions for encouraging Beecher to move in with him were more sinister than he let on, as he pronounces him as his “prag,” which means sex slave (1.01). The difference between Clark Davis and Tobias Beecher is made clear in the relationship between Beecher and Schillinger. Davis is portrayed as part predator/prey by Piñero, while

Beecher is portrayed purely as a prey by Fontana. The ownership that Davis displayed in his relationship to the young girls he sexually abused is inverted on Beecher's body, as he is the symbolic conquest of the prison system when Schillinger tattoos a swastika on Beecher's buttocks and rapes him. Beecher, unlike Davis, is essential to the narrative of the television show, as without him, there is no one for the average HBO subscriber to empathize with on the show, as everyone else depicted is a violent delinquent, the wrong color, or both. Therefore, Fontana makes the choice of allowing Beecher to take a much more pragmatic route in the development of his character arc.

Schillinger's branding is the point in which Beecher and Davis' character trajectories diverge. While Clark Davis might have indignantly cried foul, astonished at the loss of his personal rights, Beecher engages in a form of self-dialogue. During this inner conversation he weighs his pre-prison expectations and his short experience in prison versus his chances of surviving in the future, as he will remain in prison for at least four more years before he becomes eligible for parole. As the son of a wealthy lawyer and as someone with experience with dealing in courtrooms, it could be expected that he would deny Schillinger's sexual advances on the grounds that they interfere with his rights to safety while imprisoned; however, Beecher knows that, like in *Short Eyes*, the law is not always just and fair. After weighing his options, Beecher makes a pragmatic decision and stays in Schillinger's cell, where is put through various forms of physical and emotional abuse, which includes acts of sodomy (1.02).

The split of his pre-prison lawyer identity and his role as Schillinger's prag offers a clear view of the dualistic self at work, as the two identities are compartmentalized and seemingly independent of each other. His prison identity is the one that is displayed to the prison population at large. In almost every interaction with Schillinger, Beecher assumes the role of the subjugated

slave, agreeing to share meals, showers, and sexual intercourse with Schillinger. The consequence of not confirming his role as Schillinger's slave is public shame and violent reprisals, so this identity is continuously and viciously affirmed. However painful it is to act in this way, Beecher makes a conscious choice to adopt this behavior because he sees it as a benefit. Denying his association with Schillinger would expose him to violence from the black, white, and Latino factions in Oz.

Beecher's pre-prison identity does emerge a few times during the course of the show's first season. Upon meeting Ryan O'Reilly, an Irish drug dealer that befriends Beecher in order to receive legal advice, Beecher is allowed to connect to the life he had before his conviction. When speaking with O'Reilly, Beecher becomes a lawyer again and realizes how absurd his life has become under Schillinger's rule (1.04). The discrepancy between the status he maintained outside of prison, and who he's become inside of prison, drive Beecher to engage in drug use and one day, he attacks Schillinger during a drug-induced haze. Schillinger is blinded in one eye as a result and Beecher is sent to solitary confinement (1.06), emerging from his time in solitary confinement transformed into a hyper-violent individual that, upon being engaged in a fight by Vern Schillinger in the next episode, fights back and punctuates his victory by defecating on Vern Schillinger's face (1.07).

This incident marks the second evolution of Beecher's prison identity. Because the dualistic self represents "two conscious and interdependent identity-preservation tactics, formulated through self-dialogue and refined through tentative interaction with others" (Schmid and Jones 419). Beecher's change is one that occurred because of prolonged, continued interaction in the prison environment proved that Beecher's approach of appeasement toward Schillinger and his group was not sustainable. Instead, revisions were made to the identity that

Beecher portrayed and he emerged as someone who fits the mold of hyper-violence that permeates the show. *Oz* averages about a dozen violent acts per episode and the acts come in virtually every sadistic form imaginable (Yousman 144), and Beecher himself was a target of many of acts of violence administered by hyper-violent alpha males. Having had experienced first-hand the power that these individuals possess. Beecher made the conscious effort choice of altering the prison identity that he portrayed to the prison. The change he enacted on himself worked, as Beecher was able to survive the show's six brutal seasons, but in the end, he did so at a great expense.

### **Conclusion**

What *Short Eyes* and *Oz* show us is that adaptability is paramount in surviving prison as a first-time felon; however, there is something far grater to be learned here. While Davis (and everything he represents) was a danger to society in the world of *Short Eyes*, his deviancy was not the reason that he died. In actuality, he was headed back to the streets until he tried to impose his will on the prison system of *Short Eyes*. In *Oz*, Tobias Beecher was one of only four main characters to survive through the show's entire, six-year run and he did so by doing what Davis could not: give himself over, body and soul, to the penitentiary system. Beecher, in order to survive in a world full of brutal, hyper-violent individuals, became one himself. Fontana and Piñero both portray the prison system as a world in which the prison authorities hold very little sway in the everyday life of the prison system. In these two works, we see that the main characters are pushed toward becoming someone different than who they were prior to incarceration. This push is a push that is promoted by the fear of the violent consequences that one would face without acquiescing to the demands of the prison system, which as we will see in the next chapter, is known as the program (Piñero 125). Despite the differences caused by the

different mediums that these two stories are told, the thematic similarities of the two suggest that this transformation of the pre-prison identity to a prison identity is one that is widely felt. After all, both of these works portray a similar process, even though they were created 20 years apart; one was created by an Anglo-American in his late forties, the other was created by a Puerto Rican immigrant in his late twenties; Fontana grew up affluently and grew up learning about classic theatre and the classic myths (Smith), Piñero grew up poor and grew up learning about surviving in the streets by stealing (Bennetts). Two very different lives are joined by the dehumanization that prisoners experience in prisons.

### CHAPTER III

#### RACE, THE PROGRAM, AND THE PRISON IDENTITY

The creation of a prison identity, the façade that an inmate portrays to the prison world in order to fit in, does not happen in a vacuum. When an inmate is introduced into the prison environment, they are pushed to engage in a system that has its own, underling social system and hierarchy that permeates the entirety of the social environment in which the inmate will find himself. The main determinant of that context, according to Miguel Piñero, is the program, which forces individuals into compromising aspects of their humanity in order to survive the prison environment.

*Oz* and *Short Eyes* each depict the influence of the program's emphasis and its effect on the prison population in the world that each presents. The program is, according to *Short Eyes* and *Oz*, a system of rules and regulations that is created by different ethnicities in prison and is enforced by those same ethnicities. By being a system that is particular to a specific race, the program places the race of an individual as the defining characteristic that will define every interaction in which that individual engages while in prison. The central argument of this chapter is that the program propagates racial social dynamics that trigger the formation of an inmate's prison identity and ultimately lead to the dehumanization of the individual.

In *Oz*, we see that race-based pairings in lieu of identity-based pairings place Tobias Beecher in a position in which he is very susceptible to the approach of a powerful, yet deranged,

individual like Vern Schillinger. The program and its delegation of the prison power structures to the leadership of each race also enables these leaders to set up power structures that dehumanize new inmates and force them to engage in prison life in a violent manner as a form of seeking independence from their ethnic leaders, as well as the rest of the prison population at large. The emphasis on racial relationships and the inner group dynamics, such as the white-on-white brutality the program allows, are what help the development of new prison identities in Tom Fontana's *Oz*. Furthermore, the program also validates the use of sexual aggression as a way to reinforce the power of one individual over another.

In *Short Eyes*, Piñero also explores the theme of interracial and intraracial lust in order to analyze the role of the program in the creation of prison identities. However, the characters that he creates in order to facilitate this exploration are different from the one-dimensional characters that are seen in *Oz*. The characters that Piñero portrays in his play do not seek to forcefully exert their authority over another inmate as a show of power, as the main culprit of this action, Paco, does it out of his own notion of love. Yet, this show of sexual aggression provides the impetus for another character, Cupcakes, to use his knowledge of the racial and sexual dynamics of the program to refocus Paco's sexual aggression toward Clark Davis. He, according to the program that the inmates in *Short Eyes* have created, is open to such approaches. Whereas Beecher transforms into his prison identity as a consequence of violence that he experienced because of the program, Cupcakes changes into his prison identity in order to avoid it.

### **Definition of the Program**

The program, as seen in the work of Miguel Piñero and Tom Fontana, is a code of conduct that dictates the appropriate way in which an inmate may interact with another inmate while in prison. The massive importance of the program is subtle to the viewers of *Short Eyes*

and *Oz* because it is not written on any wall, recorded in any manual, or announced over any speaker the way that codes of conduct are shared and propagated in other institutions. Instead, this code of conduct is passed down through verbal tradition from prisoner to prisoner, its enforcement carried out through forceful, aggressive repercussions for anyone that does not abide by its rules. Miguel Piñero believed that the program was such an important element of understanding what prison life is like that he included a definition of the term in the “Glossary of Slang” included at the end of the play script of *Short Eyes*. In here, we see that the program is defined as:

The do’s and don’ts of prison life. Programs are ethnically determined: they are different for whites, blacks, Puerto Ricans, etc. Programs are not enforced by the prison authorities: they are determined by the prisoners themselves. The program for the whole prison regulates the way in which members of different ethnic groups relate to one another in specific situations. It rigidly governs who sits with whom in the mess hall; where people sit in the auditorium; who smokes first; etc. It is the first thing a prisoner learns when he enters an institution. Failure to follow the program is a sure way to have trouble with fellow inmates and will result in physical reprisals– even death (Piñero 125-126).

The program is essential to everyday life in prison, as it is part of the system through which inmates communicate. The term is not heard at any point during the film version of the play, and is only heard once during the stage production. Yet, the program’s presence is felt throughout the entirety of the stage or film performance of *Short Eyes* and it is the context that drives Piñero’s narrative, as well as his depiction of what life is like in prisons. The program is shown to be the main influence of the creation of an inmate’s prison identity, as its emphasis on race proves to be



the motivation for Clark Davis's murder. When he enters the cellblock, Longshoe decides to explain the workings of the prison social dynamics to Davis. But, when he and the other prisoners present find out that Clark Davis is a pedophile, the "lowest, most despicable kind of criminal" (Piñero 126), Longshoe is forced to discipline him by spitting on him. He takes the responsibility of punishing him because since programs are ethnically enforced, his position as a white prisoner puts him in charge of ensuring that the white prison contingent is respected. Having someone like Clark Davis around puts him and all the other white prisoners in a state of anxiety because, in the eyes of the other prisoners, the whiteness of Clark and Longshoe serve as a bond between the two. The anxiety that Longshoe feels because of the presence of Clark Davis, the white pedophile, is so strong that he can't fathom anyone in the block seeing any visitors while Davis is still present. When Juan begins to leave the block to see a visitor, Longshoe interrupts him, telling him to not "make" his visit. His speech is mostly unintelligible, signaling the stress he feels, but he does say that "everything's coming down," referring to the social structure that characterizes the cellblock (Piñero 60). While the rest of the cellblock harass Davis, they remain largely unchanged and go about their business as normal. For Longshoe, though, having Davis around signals an assault on his own identity as a white man, implying that the racial identification of the program is extremely important to the prisoners.

Similarly, Tom Fontana's *Oz* portrays a concept similar to Piñero's definition of the program in his work. In *Oz*, like in *Short Eyes*, the program is seen in the way that inmates self-organize into hierarchies and create their own governing dynamics without needing input or guidance from the guards. A simple glance at the many lunchroom scenes in *Oz* is enough to see the invisible hand of the program at work. In the series' first episode, appropriately titled "The Routine," a black poet recites a slam poem about attacking someone who stole a cigarette as the

camera pans around him, revealing a color-coded map of the organization of inmates during meal times. Bare black heads, Muslim heads covered by kufis, white heads, gray haired heads, brown heads adorned by bandanas are all seen in different clusters of the mess hall with little intermingling seen throughout. There is order here, but it is an order that is imposed on the prisoners by themselves because the guards do not assign seats or otherwise direct them in the mess hall. Following the end of the poem, the camera pans behind Tobias Beecher, a new white inmate in Oz, as he looks for a place to sit and eat his meal. He passes by the black lunchroom contingent, aware that he probably doesn't belong there and goes straight to the Italians to ask for permission to sit there. After he is rejected, he finds company with Bob Rebadow, an inmate too old and too weak to belong to any particular group (*Oz* 1.01). When Beecher passes by the blacks without even asking for permission to sit there, Fontana shows his audience the program's power to subtly organize a population and divide them along racial lines. No one told Beecher that he couldn't sit with any of the black groups, but the way in which the mess hall was divided by along racial lines simply implied that he wouldn't be accepted there. These sorts of social interactions are seen throughout much of the representations of prison life portrayed in *Short Eyes* and *Oz*. The program dictates proper comportment, such as in the event above, but sometimes the program can also lead to violent acts and the perpetuation of the threat of violence in the prison environment.

The fact that the program is so dependent on ethnicity is shown in these two works to bind the social status of individuals to their race, making each individual a representative of that race in the eyes of the entire prison population. If a member of someone's race acts in a manner that is socially unacceptable, it is not only the pariah's status and safety that is at stake, but also the status and safety of every member of that race. Hence, when an inmate like *Short Eyes'* Clark

Davis, the white, newly-arrived inmate, is revealed to be a pedophile, it is the job of white inmates to discipline him, as it is their reputation that he is hurting. In Act One of *Short Eyes*, Clark Davis walks into the cell block of the House of Detention and is originally greeted and welcomed by Murphy Longshoe. The character of Clark Davis in *Short Eyes* has not been on stage for more than two minutes before Longshoe warns him of the program's rules. Longshoe tells Davis that he "better hip [him] to what's happening fast" (Piñero 26). *Short Eyes* depicts how in an environment like prison, failure to adhere to the program results in quick retributive punishment; therefore, Longshoe knows that this must be the first piece of knowledge that he must impart on the newly-arrived inmate. "Look here, this is our section" is the first piece of advice that Longshoe provides, alluding to the clear spatialization dynamics that are at work in prison blocks. "Stay away from the black gods," "it's okay to rap with the blacks, but don't get too close to any of them," "we're the minority here" alludes to the clear social hierarchies that delineate the social structure of the cellblock environment. However, this welcome is quickly changed when it is made public that Davis is "a child rapist... a baby rapist" (Piñero 30). Nett's words force Longshoe to reevaluate his welcoming treatment of Davis because he is "one of [his] kin," according to Cupcakes, "another devil," according to El Raheem (who called Longshoe the same name during an earlier altercation), and his "homey," according to Ice (Piñero 26). In order to draw a clear distinction between him and Davis, Longshoe walks up to Davis and makes it painfully obvious that the white skin that they share is not enough to overcome the gravity of Davis's crime. Longshoe asks Davis, "Short eyes? Short eyes... Clark, are you one of those short-eyes freaks... are you a short-eyes freak?" He stresses the word freak because a freak is, by definition, an abnormal phenomenon... an aberration. He repeats it to tell the inmates present that the sexual deviance of Davis is in no way representative of his own identity as a white male.

When Nett confirms that Davis is a pedophile, Longshoe accentuates the animosity he feels for Davis publically by spitting on his face as he and the other men exit the stage (Piñero 30). Here, we see that the centrality of ethnicity in everyday prison interactions caused by the program forces one inmate to defend his honor by abusing and attacking another inmate. The subtle implications of the program that we saw in the mess hall scene in *Oz* and when Longshoe instructed Davis on the social dynamics of their prison block in *Short Eyes* are very different from the overt form of punishment that Longshoe displays toward Davis after finding out that he is an alleged pedophile. *Oz* and *Short Eyes* depict the diverse methods in which the program can operate is a consequence of the program's status as the dominant influence of the way in which social interactions are carried out in *Short Eyes* and *Oz*. The way in which Longshoe is forced to discipline Davis and the way that Beecher implicitly understands the racial divisions of the mess hall show the influence of the program in educating an inmate's prison identity.

### **The Importance of Race in *Oz***

Fontana's emphasis on the racial component of prison life is a product of an interest that he developed as a result of hearing about the Attica prison riots, an event that happened near his childhood home in Buffalo, New York (Sepinwall 20). These riots were described as the "bloodiest one-day encounter between Americans since the Civil War" and marked a turning point in the treatment of prisoners in American prisons. The riot came shortly after the death of George Jackson, an intellectual that wrote about the living conditions of American prisoners, as well as the state of the American justice system. In his book *Soledad Brother*, George Jackson talked about many of the injustices that inmates across the United States, including Attica, believed were being perpetrated on them. Attica prisoners held the prison staff with animosity due to the fact that they spent fourteen to sixteen hours per day in their prison cells; the mail they

received was read or stolen; reading material, especially material that concerned their legal defenses, was restricted; 100% of the guards in Attica were white, and many of them were openly racist; they received inadequate medical care; and the parole system was viewed as “inequitable.” Following Jackson’s death in 1971 during an attempted escape from San Quentin State Penitentiary in California, the prisoners in cell block D of Attica broke through a defective gate and took over one of the four prison yards, holding 40 guards as hostages. One thousand National Guardsmen, prison guards, and state and local police opened fire on the rioting inmates and quelled the rebellion. In the end, 39 men, of which 10 were hostages and 29 were inmates, were killed. (“1971: The Attica prison uprising”).

This event sparked Tom Fontana’s interest in dissecting the dynamics of racial relations and provides many of the narrative devices that fuel the first season of the television series. In *Oz*, like in Attica, we see that prisoner liberties are arbitrarily taken away by guards that believe that punishment is the sole reason why the inmates are in prison. The right to smoke cigarettes is taken away by Leo Glynn (portrayed by Ernie Hudson), prompting Tim McManus (portrayed by Terry Kinney), the unit manager of Emerald City, to tell Glynn that the ban will “incite a riot” because “this place [*Oz*] is fueled by smoke” (1.01). The simple act of smoking, Fontana leads us to believe, is one in which an individual is allowed some semblance of freedom, which is enough to maintain order in the war. However, the show’s first season shows how this freedom and others (such as the ability to have conjugal visits) are taken away , ending with a reenactment of the Attica prison riots as the first season’s finale (1.08).

The program’s emphasis on race-based identity and structure is the fuel that drives much of the conflict in *Oz*. The gradual removal of small freedoms like smoking and conjugal visits, McManus alludes to when he makes this statement, is enough to essentially “paper over” the

undergoing racial tensions that are present in everyday life in Oz. These tensions are revealed when, following Warden Glynn's announcement of the smoking ban, a lunchroom fight breaks out and many inmates use this opportunity to attack members of opposing races. Anger toward Glynn is refocused into violence against other races as dozens of inmates attack one another over seemingly nothing (*Oz* 1.01). But, the reason for the attack will be made clear when the audience has the opportunity to see all the underlying racial tensions that leave the prison in a state of constant anxiety and in a state of alertness. The program, and the prescriptive behavior that it permeates through the prison environment, is the locus from which much of the tension in the prison block is derived.

### ***Oz* and the Indoctrination into the Program**

Fontana shows us that this process of information gathering is one that occurs within the racial and ethnic context of prison. Because race forces inmates to create affiliations with ethnic groups that engage in violent behavior, the program creates a context in which the inmates learn that violent behavior is the natural way through which to engage in their environment. However, the inmates that are introduced in *Oz* do not naturally gravitate toward these violent ethnic groups, but rather, they are forced into them by the ethnic divisions that are predicated by the program. The inmate's entry into the prison system in *Oz*, is shown by Fontana to be one that consists of much anxiety. According to Schmid and Jones, the entry into a prison system is one in which the inmate, in a state of duress, must weigh his pre-prison conceptions of what prison will be like with real-time information of the social and structural systems of the prison once they're inside in order to formulate a plan of survival in a place as dangerous as prison. The initial reflex is to try to distance oneself from the prison by becoming withdrawn. However, this strategy does not last long and the inmate is forced to engage with the people around him to

begin gathering information about the best way to survive (Schmid and Jones 419). The development of prison identities, the purpose of all this gathered information, happens under a racial system that is promoted by the program. In essence, the program is what drives inmates to join the racial group that will help them formulate their prison identity.

This process is seen at work in Tobias Beecher's introduction into the cellblock at Emerald City. Tobias Beecher is seen to be nervously looking past the holding room that detains him and at the emerald-green walls of the prison as Diane Whittlesey (played by Edie Falco) introduces him to one of the power systems to which he will have to subjugate himself. While Beecher waits for his sponsor to arrive, he listens to information about the first system. The Whittlesey tells him,

In Emerald City, we got rules. A lot more rules than anywhere else in Oz. Your cell is your room. Keep it clean. Spotless. You are to exercise regularly, attend class, attend drug and alcohol counseling, work in the prison factory. Follow the routine. We tell you when to sleep. When to eat. When to sleep. There is no yelling, no fighting, no fucking. Follow the rules. Learn self-discipline, because if you had any self-discipline or any control over yourself at all, you wouldn't be here right now (1.01).

In this short introduction to life in the block, the guard informs Beecher and two more recent inmates that several of their essential physiological needs are now in the hands of the state, those being the need for food, drink, sleep, and sex ("Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs"). The control of the state that is being exerted over these individuals is overt, as cells are fairly concrete ways to incarcerate someone. However, during this same introduction to the cell block, a much more important form of indoctrination happens, as this is when the inmates will be meeting their "sponsors," which are current Emerald City inmates that are there to serve as guidance for the

new arrivals. These sponsors appear to be deliberately chosen, as a black inmate, Paul Markstram (played by O.L. Duke) is paired up with Jefferson Keane, the leader of the black contingent in Oz; Donald Groves (portrayed by Sean Whitesell), an inmate convicted of murdering and cannibalizing his parents, goes with Bob Rebadow, an inmate who has hallucinations and claims to speak to god; and Tobias Beecher is assigned to Dino Ortolani (played by Jon Seda), a member of the Italian mafia (1.01). The first two pairings make much sense, for the characters that are being paired up are very similar in demeanor, as well as race. The third pairing, whoever, that of Beecher and Ortolani, does not make sense like the previous two do. Beecher is neither Italian nor a drug dealer, which sums up Ortolani's role in Emerald City. After exchanging a brief piece of advice ("Don't smile... ever."), Ortolani essentially rids himself of Beecher.

The importance of this event is that by pairing Tobias Beecher with an inmate that has nothing in common with him, except for the color of his skin, Fontana shows the overpowering effect that race has on prisoner relations, beginning Beecher's interaction with the program that rules in prisons. Without even meeting a single inmate, Beecher is made aware that whites are paired with whites and blacks are paired with blacks. Pairing Keane with Markstram and pairing Groves with Rebadow just served to reinforce the idea that someone's race is the important characteristic that an inmate possesses. It may seem that the program's role in pairing these individual's up is secondary to the role of the prison administration, as it is they that decides who is paired up with whom. But, the prisoner complicity in this system is validated when Keane and Markstram give each other a gang salute, cementing their bond as gang members, and Rebadow and Groves share a more unconventional handshake when Groves licks Rebadow's hand. The



pairing system is so familiar to the inmates that they do not question the logic behind it, indicating that the system has been internalized and normalized by them.

The most important facet of the mentoring system is that it is shown that there is no consideration for the Beecher's pre-prison identity when he is paired with Dino Ortolani. The two could not be more different and this has an effect in Beecher's character arc, as this wide chasm in their two personalities is what eventually drives Beecher into the hands of Vern Schillinger, who will play the largest role in the formation of Tobias Beecher's prison identity.

The program's emphasis on race-based identification, according to Fontana's *Oz*, reduces a person's identity into a simple color: white, black, or brown. Tobias Beecher is mild-mannered, meek, weak, and has no social affiliations in the prison environment. Dino, on the other hand, is jail for the murder of one Irish gang member, as well as the shooting of another and engages in several fights during the only episode in which he appears. He is the nephew of Nino Schibetta, the leader of the Italian Mafia in *Oz*. The relative positions of these two individuals is one that, barring their race, could not be further apart (*Oz* 1.01). The program, however, does not see personalities and individual identities, as it places all importance in the ethnicity and the race of an individual. If a new inmate like Beecher were paired up with an inmate that was more similar to him, Beecher could have learned how an inmate like him could survive in prison without necessarily sacrificing everything that makes him who he is, such as his education, his status as a father, his role as a husband, and his profession as a lawyer. But, when the program dictates that he be paired up with someone like Dino, who has no interest in mentoring him or showing him to survive in *Oz*, Beecher is left without any recourse to turn to and seeks first person who shows him some compassion. Beecher approaches Dino unaware that talking to someone is not as simple as walking up and starting a conversation. He greets him, hoping to start a relationship

with his mentor. Dino responds, “Hey, look, pal... I know I’m supposed to be some kind of bro, but the headline reads: ‘I don’t give a shit about you’” (1.01). Later on in the same episode, Beecher asks if he can sit by him in the lunchroom, but Dino responds with a stern “No,” and with that, the relationship between the two is ended.

Fontana’s *Oz* shows us that the emphasis on race that the program prescribes has an effect larger and more serious than the simple ostracization of individuals. In the case of Tobias Beecher, he is left with no support system in the prison, an environment that mandates that individuals seek and affiliate themselves with a group for protection. If Beecher is the “point of view” character of the television series (Sepinwall 20) and the “HBO subscriber,” as Fontana has stated (qtd in Sepinwall 20), Dino’s dismissal of Beecher marks for him, and for the audience, the inciting moment that will provide much of the drama for the television series. An inciting moment is defined as the event that “disturbs the picture or their [the character’s] world as we have found it” and that when it occurs, “we know at once what the play is going to be about—what the conflict is—what the characters are trying to get out of—what the actors bring into reality” (Wright 51). When Beecher is dismissed by Ortolani, the mentor that the program chose for him, he is drawn to the hands of Vern Schillinger, who will put him through extreme abuse through the show’s first and subsequent seasons. As the reference point to the audience, a role through which the events of the series are filtered and digested by the viewing audience, his job is to viscerally share with the audience the results of the race-based identification that the program creates.

### **Power and the Development of the Prison Identity**

Of all the characteristics that form an individual’s sense of self, the one that is under the most constant threat throughout Fontana’s narrative is that of heterosexuality. Often, homosexual

sex is used as a weapon that is used to symbolize dominance over another individual. When the sexual act is carried out, the perpetrator exerts his authority over another and the victim of the act is denied one of the fundamental aspects of his identity: his role as a male in heterosexual relations. Fontana posits this as one of the most feared acts to suffer in prison and uses it as the plot device that forces Beecher to engage in race-based identification, as we see that this is what drives Beecher to seek shelter through his affiliation with Vern Schillinger. When Beecher first meets his cellmate, the enormous Simon Adebisi (portrayed by Adewale Akinnuoye-Agbaje), he is overpowered and grabbed by Adebisi who tells him that “anything you got belongs to me.” While he states this, Adebisi, a black inmate of Nigerian origin, holds Beecher close enough that Beecher can get a good look at the muscle tone of Adebisi’s arms. Intimidated, he chooses to stop complaining about Adebisi’s rummaging through his belongings. The double entendre of Adebisi’s statement is fully comprehended later that night, when Adebisi wakes up and sees that Beecher is trembling in his bed, afraid of what Adebisi might do to him. Adebisi walks up to Beecher, puts his hand on Beecher’s leg and rubs it forcefully, saying “I won’t fuck you, prag... At least, not tonight.” The next scene immediately takes place in the lunch room, in which Beecher is shown to be thinking as he eats his food by himself. His solitude is both metaphorical and literal. He is alone in Oz, without a system of associations that can provide him with the safety that is available from one of the larger ethnic groups. He is also lonely, as his only social interactions thus far have been with people like Adebisi and Dino Ortolani, who are antagonistic toward him.

Adebisi’s rape threat forces Beecher to seek anyone that can provide him with information about the kind of identity he needs to develop for survival in prison. This leaves Beecher particularly vulnerable to the approach of Vern Schillinger. Schillinger initiates a

conversation by putting himself in the shoes that Beecher was in just the day before by asking the same question that Beecher asked Ortolani in the lunch room, “Mind if I sit here?” This initial approach serves to create some commonality between the two men, which is something that Beecher has not experienced since his initial arrival at Oz. Schillinger elaborates on that sense of commonality by telling Beecher that he was in his shoes when he arrived at Oz. “He tried that same shit on me when I first got here” (1.01). Schillinger concludes the conversation by exchanging some pleasantries with Beecher, but also gives him a solution to his Adebisi problem: request a move into Schillinger’s cell. Before he leaves, he reinforces the caring tone of their conversation by advising Beecher to wear armor, or a phonebook around his torso that will shield him from pointed objects. Receiving an invitation to a cell is something that he never received from Adebisi, who made his attitude toward Beecher known from the start and asserted that their relationship had a prey/predator dynamic. Ortolani never gave him any sort of practical advice the way that Schillinger did. No one had approached and initiated an honest conversation with Beecher like Schillinger. All these things persuade Beecher to seek Schillinger out, but none of them is as important as the fact that, according to the program, the bond between Schillinger and Beecher is one that is acceptable, as they are both white. Schillinger not only represents the possibility of a mentor or new cell mate in prison: he represents the induction into one of the larger factions in the prison structure in Oz.

In Beecher’s mind, and in the minds of the HBO subscriber that is watching the events unfold on the screen, Schillinger represents a possible salvation. He is an inmate that is welcoming of Beecher, but is also endorsed by the program that runs prison interrelations. The fact that Schillinger seemed to be approachable helped create interest in Beecher’s pursuing of that relationship, but it was the social dynamics of the program that ultimately pushed Beecher to

move into Schillinger's cell. Beecher was seeking to join one of the large contingents in the mess hall that he first saw when he entered Oz.

The program-prescribed move into Schillinger's cell is the event that begins Beecher's transformation into his prison identity. When Beecher moves in with Schillinger, he finds out that he is the leader of the prison's chapter of the Aryan Brotherhood. Schillinger, in his position of leadership, has the freedom to determine the program that he and his subjects, the large white, racist contingent found in Oz, must subscribe to. With his move into his cell, Beecher has inadvertently joined Schillinger's group and finds that he has been assigned the lowest social position in the group, that of a "prag," or sex slave. As a prag, according to the Aryan Brotherhood version of the program, Beecher has no rights. He is not entitled to anything; he is not even entitled to his own body. The racial program that Beecher submits himself to has two different consequences in the development of his character: the first is that his pre-prison identity is systematically stripped from him through a series of abuses and tortures, and the second is that he learns the value of a violent acts inside the prison environment.

Beecher's body becomes Schillinger's property, symbolically implying the ownership of the program over Beecher's developing identity. Schillinger tells Beecher after he moves in that he will brand him himself. When Beecher replies that only livestock get branded, Schillinger laughs and counters with "Livestock...that's what you are. My livestock. Because now, Tobias... your ass belongs to me." This short, yet meaningful, interchange is followed by one of Oz's signature dramatic monologues by Augustus Hill (portrayed by Harold Perrineau) that centers around the notions of manhood and its place in the operation of the program in prison. "They call this the penal system," he says, "but it's really the penis system. It's about how big, it's about how long, it's about how hard. Live in Oz is all about your dick and anyone that tells

you any different ain't got one." As he concludes his monologue, the camera cuts to a scene that is only possible because of the fact that *Oz* is shot with cameras: a close-up of Beecher's face as he is branded with a swastika by Schillinger. Beecher's face signals to the audience that he is in pain and that he is very much against this act, but he is very careful about not moving his body (*Oz* 1.01). His rejection of the symbol of the swastika is secondary to his survivalist need to go along with the rules of the Aryan Brotherhood program that Schillinger takes upon tattooing on his body. For the rest of the series, despite any changes in the power structure of the prison (like when Beecher revolts against Schillinger's power), the trace of the program is forever carved unto Beecher's body.

Schillinger abuses Beecher and systematically strips every facet of his pre-prison identity. In addition to branding him and labeling him as his property, Schillinger forces Beecher to do a number of dehumanizing acts. At the beginning of the third episode of season one, Augustus Hill delivers a monologue about the nature of god, drawing a parallel between the origin of God's power and man's. He states, "In the beginning, God was nothing. So, he started making stuff. He made the dirt, he made the sky, the made the water, he made things that swim, things that slither, things with legs. I mean, God turned himself into a big shot. Then, after a couple of days or a couple of million years, god breathed life into man and he's been sucking the life out of us ever since." This monologue speaks directly to the origin of power in the prison setting under the program. It is by creating things to dominate, like Beecher, that people like Schillinger draw their power. Like God creating animals and people, Schillinger creates a prag for himself that he can command and dominate. God breathes life out of humans and Schillinger draws the life out of Beecher in order to establish his position of authority so that he may do the same to other men. This aspect of the program is one that is in a constant repetitive cycle, but while this goes on,

Beecher becomes less and less like himself and more and more like the man that the program requires him to be. Schillinger becomes a god through each dehumanizing act that he perpetrates on Beecher. In the same episode, he forces Beecher to take a shower with him, crudely referencing a sexual act that he will enact on him. Later on, when Beecher points out that Schillinger's god, Jesus Christ, was likely of brown skin, Schillinger makes Beecher lick his boots clean in front of the entire cellblock. In a later episode, Schillinger forces Beecher to dye his hair, wear lipstick, high heels, and a dress while singing in the prison talent show, prompting Beecher to use heroin to be able to get through the humiliation (*Oz* 1.06). With each act, Beecher loses sight of who he is and becomes the prag that Schillinger wants him to be.

### **The Program's Language of Violence**

Schillinger and the power that his race gives him over Beecher, as well as the power that he dominates Beecher with sexually essentially kills Beecher's pre-prison identity. In the site of the prison's legal library, after finding out that Beecher is helping Jefferson Keane mount a legal defense, Schillinger uses his position of authority to make the librarian leave the room. When he and Beecher are alone, Beecher denies helping Keane, but Schillinger, unconvinced, violently grabs Beecher by the neck and screams, "You will not fuck with me, prag. Eat the page" (1.04). Beecher acquiesces, swallowing the documents of his former profession, erasing that part of his identity from his mind. The impact of Schillinger's violence is confirmed when Beecher meets with another inmate:

O'Reilly: I heard you talked to Keane even though I said not to. That took some balls.

You starting to grow some balls Beecher?

Beecher: I had balls. A long, long time ago. And I thought I could get them back by saving Jefferson Keane. But, the lawyer in me... got stretched out on the rack and hung by the neck until dead... you got any dope?

Tobias Beecher's pre-prison identity has died, as he states, stretched out on the rack and hung by the neck by Vern Schillinger. The program dictated that Beecher become his prag in order to help him survive, but in the end, the program is what symbolically killed him. Arising from the death of pre-prison Beecher, however, is Beecher's prison identity, which has been learning from all the abuse that Schillinger has been putting Beecher through. From these violent acts, Beecher has learned that the language of prison is a language of violence. He has learned that he must speak this language if he wants to survive in Oz, which is why he changes into a brutal individual that perpetrates acts of aggression toward his former tormentor. After meeting the parents of the little girl that he killed while drunk driving, Beecher is finally able to engage with the guilt that he feels because of his crime, which has a cathartic effect for him and marks a deep change in the attitude that he sees himself with while in prison. Beecher speaks to Sister Peter Marie (played by Rita Moreno):

Beecher: I don't know. Maybe I let Schillinger treat me like dirt because I deserve to be punished. Because I... I killed Cathy Rockwell. Because I destroyed her family, and my own.

Sister Peter Marie: And you hate yourself for that?

Beecher: Yes. I guess I hated myself back before, too. I hated myself, so I drank too much. And I hated myself for drinking too much, so to punish myself, I drank more.

Sister... I don't wanna hate me anymore.



As he speaks the last line, he smashes the lipstick that Schillinger gave me to wear as a symbol that he is no longer going to put up with Schillinger's treatment. He smashes the lipstick into the palm of his hand as the camera pans to the next scene, briefly overlaying the smashed lipstick over Schillinger's body as he sits outside of the cell that he and Beecher share. Schillinger orders Beecher to wear a shirt with the confederate flag, knowing that the prison's black prisoners will kill him; however, this is precisely what Schillinger wants because he has found a new roommate that he wants to bring into his cell. Beecher puts on the shirt, but this is the last time that Schillinger is able to exert his power over Beecher, as Beecher returns shortly after putting on the shirt and throws a chair through the window of Schillinger's cell, blinding him in one eye (1.06).

Beecher engages the same form of violent communication that seems to permeate through Oz. Schillinger draws his power and authority from the violent acts that he perpetrates on his subjects, the violent acts that he enacted upon Beecher's body. So, in order to achieve the same power, the same agency, Beecher takes it upon himself to permanently damage Schillinger's body, like Schillinger did to him. By throwing the chair through the glass wall of the room in which his prison identity was forged, Beecher symbolically frees himself of Schillinger's influence, much like burning down one's hometown when the memories of that place must be expunged. To cement his position of power over Schillinger, Beecher assaults him in the prison weight room, smashing a free weight into his head, knocking him out. While Schillinger is knocked out, Beecher ties him down as many inmates watch the event unfold. Beecher moves a table next to Schillinger's body, unzips his pants, and defecates on Schillinger's face, crudely purging the toxic waste that Schillinger inserted into Beecher's body.

As Schillinger lies unconscious, violated by Beecher, as he latter screams, “Zeig Heil! Zeil Heil, motherfucker!” sarcastically chanting the Nazi salute as he stands over its broken leader.

The episode ends with an Augustus Hill monologue in which he speaks into the camera as violent imagery play in a screen behind him. His posture is comfortable, almost as if he is dispensing valuable advice. He says, “We think we know what we need. We spend our time trying to get what we want. Who can help us? Who’s in the way? We make our moves and sometimes we get lucky.” At this point the footage in the behind Hill switches to a close up of Tobias Beecher’s face, his eyes determined, his stance rigid. Hill continues, “We get exactly what we want. And life gets worse. Simple truth #22: Be careful what you wish for, brother. Be very, very careful” (1.07). Fontana acknowledges the intended relationship his audience is supposed to have with Beecher by including a “debriefing” section that explains what the audience just saw. Beecher sought freedom; it was what he wished for. In the end, he got it, but the rules of the program dictated that this freedom would not be given—that this freedom had to be earned by perpetrating violence on Schillinger. Because of the rules of the program, Beecher has to sacrifice himself and his morals in order to achieve that freedom.

### **Racial Lust as a Mechanism of the Program in *Short Eyes***

Piñero’s authorship of *Short Eyes* was borne out of many years of experience in prisons, as well as a complex perspective of the very question of individual identity and racial-identification that he discusses in his play. Miguel Piñero’s experience as a Puerto Rican immigrant living in New York, a city that contains incredible contrasts between its poor neighborhoods and the glitz and glamour of Manhattan, are complemented by his experience as both a son and a provider for his family. Add to this the fact that Piñero lived in a society of laws, but consistently broke those laws, and we end up with an author that was well-acquainted

with the experience of an individual that had to negotiate different identities, such as citizen, immigrant, Puerto Rican, New York resident, prisoner, free man, etc. He even helped coin the term Nuyorican, which was meant as a “conflation between a location, New York, and a national and cultural identity, Puerto Rican” (Rossini 29).

Due to his experience with dueling identities, his depiction of the program’s role in creating prison identities is more complex than the one we see in Fontana’s *Oz*. Piñero complicates the formation of the prison identity by having characters that do not fit into the mold that is seen at work in a simpler work like *Oz*. In *Short Eyes*, Clark Davis represents an identity that is too far socioeconomically removed from the inmates that populate *Short Eyes*’ prison to ever meaningfully engage any of them. Cupcakes, however, is different than Davis. He is Puerto Rican and is portrayed to have assimilated himself to the culture of the prison well, as his “toasts” are appreciated and encouraged by the inmates (Piñero 24). As such, he is able to acquaint himself with the way the program works. Cupcakes doesn’t change as a result of the racially-mandated program, but he changes because he uses the dynamics of the program to avoid the lust of other inmates and instead refocuses them on Clark Davis. In *Oz*, Beecher was changed *because* of Schillinger’s abuse. In *Short Eyes*, Cupcakes changes in order to *avoid* abuse.

Whereas the prison identities in *Oz* revolve around the dynamics of power in interpersonal relationships, in *Short Eyes*, these identities revolve around the pursuit of objects of lust. In *Oz*, Schillinger pursues Beecher originally because he wants to make him his prag, which is a simple dominator/dominated relationship. Prior to Beecher’s rebellion against Schillinger at the end of the show’s first season, there is nothing in their relationship that indicates any sort of parity of power. Schillinger dictates Beecher’s actions and brands him cattle, symbolically

stamping him with his ownership. In *Short Eyes*, the development of prison identities is much more subtle, as we lack the clear power hierarchy that is seen in *Oz*. Miguel Alvarín, a Nuyorican scholar and poet and a friend of Miguel Piñero, said that “I think the most important part about ’74... was the fact that I came to the realization that I was living in an age of no theories. No socialism, no communism. They had all fucked up and died, so in an age of theory (or lack of theory), there was nothing left but lust” (Rossini 31-32). In a world in which there is nothing left but lust, Rossini writes, lust becomes the object through which identity is defined. In *Short Eyes*, the formation of Cupcakes’ prison identity happens as the result of trying to avoid becoming the object of the other inmates’ lust.

Cupcakes is able to avoid the other inmates’ sexual advances by, in a sense, using the racial animosity that is encouraged by the program. There are very clear racial delineations between inmates from different social groups and the stability of the cellblock is always threatened by possible race-based violence. There is an early event in the play that shows just how fragile the relations between the different ethnic groups are and how advantageous this fact can be for Cupcakes. Early in the play, Cupcakes, a “Puerto Rican pretty boy of 21 who looks younger,” is told by Paco, another Puerto Rican, to “put your shirt like this on your waist and move your ass, Coochie-coochie-coochie.” Cupcakes responds negatively to Paco’s request, but Paco continues to harass him and is actually joined by another inmate, Juan, who says that “people without ‘plexes [a psychological complex] might as well turn stuff.” Omar, a black inmate, joins in the catcalling, which becomes a problem for Cupcakes. Cupcakes repeatedly says that he is not interested in engaging in the homosexual advances that he is the target of, but one by one, the cellblock attempts to force him into that role. The harassment continues until El Raheem, a black Muslim, admonishes Omar for attempting to “deliberately acting and thinking

out of your nature... thinking like the white devil, Yacoub” (Piñero 18). Longshoe, the only white inmate present at the time, is offended and engages El Raheem in a verbal fight that escalates into a physical confrontation.

The arbitrariness of the cause of the fight is not lost in the audience, as it appears to be so sudden that the prison switches from harassing Cupcakes to fighting in a race-based fight. The seeming arbitrariness of this how, however, is better understood when examined through the program. The program in *Short Eyes*, like the program in *Oz*, is determinant of the way in which races interact with one another. By disrespecting Longshoe, even if it was in passing, El Raheem has called Longshoe’s pride as a white man into question. Not fighting back and allowing the disrespect to hang in the air without acknowledgment would result in further abuse by the prisoners, as Longshoe would be seen as weak. Given that Longshoe’s position in the prison hierarchy is already low—“we’re the minority here, so be cool,” he explains to Clark Davis later on—Longshoe is left with no choice but to fight. As El Raheem and Longshoe fight to decide the winner of this racial tussle, Cupcakes proves to be the true winner. The fight provided a diversion for the cellblock that refocused their attention from his body and unto the bodies of the other two men.

The racial incident that results in Clark Davis’s death is seen when Paco accosts Cupcakes, in which Piñero implies that race has the ability to cost people their lives. Paco sneaks up on Cupcakes while he is in the shower and kisses him, professing his love for him in English and Spanish. Paco’s approach is, once again, not an example of dominance in the way that Schillinger approaches Beecher in their encounters. Paco states, “I don’t want nothing from you the hard way,” implying that he wants consent from Cupcakes (Piñero 67). He also even offers to “go both ways,” alluding to the possibility of an equal partnership between the two (Rossini 39).

The code switches between English and Spanish, using Spanish to profess his love for him and English to address Cupcakes' denials. He showers praise on him with phrases like "Tu me tiene loco... me desespera... Nene, estoy echulao contigo" and "Que te quiero y que te adoro... nene," using Spanish, his mother tongue to engage feelings from his heart. When he is rejected by Cupcakes, he retorts with English: "You're telling me? Boy, you don't tell me nothing" and "Go ahead and ask me... Ask me how a daddy should be asked" (Piñero 66). In the Spanish phrases, he speaks with emotion; in the English phrases, he speaks with authority. The use of English to confront Cupcakes in his denial of Paco's advancements links Paco's predatory advancements with Clark Davis's pedophile behavior because they both act as predators. While Paco is 21, the cast list states that he looks younger than his age. In this moment of crisis, in order to save himself from Paco, Cupcakes uses the racial animosity that was displayed earlier in the common room to refocus Paco's aggression to another target—this time, Clark Davis. After Paco tells Cupcakes that he loves him, Cupcakes turn to Paco and says,

Love me... you use words that you don't even know the meaning of. Brother...  
Love... Shit, there's a gringo... who does it to little girls... and you wanna mess  
with me... Why don't you hit on him... why? Cause he's white... and you're  
scared of the Whitey... But you'll fuck over your own kind... He's the one you  
should be cracking on... He's the one. Not me... But you're scared of him  
(Piñero 68).

In this line, Cupcakes does two things: he accuses Paco of aligning himself with another race, the whites, by restricting himself from sexually assaulting Davis. According to the prison hierarchy, Davis is a double minority. He's white and he's a pedophile. Hence, according to the program, the same program that places pedophiles at the bottom of the social ladder, Davis should be the

most obvious target of any unwanted homosexual advances. However, Paco is threatening someone of his own race, a “brother.” Paco redirects Paco’s lust toward Davis, and also issues a challenge by stating that Paco is not doing that already because he’s afraid of Davis’s whiteness. In issuing this challenge, Cupcakes essentially guarantees that harm will find Davis because if it doesn’t, Paco’s pride and his position in his prison’s social hierarchy will be compromised, much the same as it happened when Longshoe was forced to fight El Raheem.

Paco’s pride and sense of identity as a Puerto Rican are challenged and this drives him to take an antagonistic position toward Clark Davis as a way of reasserting his place in the prison hierarchy. After being challenged by Cupcakes, Paco leaves from the shower and doesn’t return to the stage until the prison-led council is meeting to discuss Davis’s availability as “stuff.” The very next words that Paco utters to an inmate after Cupcakes’ challenge are “Anybody that has to rape little girls is a faggot. He’s stuff... squeeze” (88), showing that Cupcakes’ words are still fresh in his mind. Paco takes the leading role in securing an inmate contingent that will sexually attack Davis and the group carries out their plan. A fight ensues between Clark Davis, the inmates, and Mr. Nett, which results in Davis’s death at the conclusion of Act II.

Cupcakes’ change, at the end of the play, is pointed out by Juan, who accuses Cupcakes of letting the system change him. At the end of the epilogue, Cupcakes is released on bail and before he leaves, Juan approaches to point out that his use of race to incite violence of Davis in order to save himself might have allowed him to survive, but it also cost him his soul. He says that “...you, like the rest of us... became a part of these walls... an extra bar in the gate... to remain a number for the rest of your life in the street world” (Piñero 124). By placing himself into the system that makes up “these walls,” Juan is alluding to the fact that the system that enslaves these men is created by the men themselves. The rules that they abide by come from the

prisoners. The racial pressure that forced Longshoe to fight El Raheem in Act I and the pressure that forced Paco to organize the attack against Clark Davis is the consequence of the same program that is outlined in the glossary of slang that comes at the end of this play. In manipulating the social norms of the program, Cupcakes did not really fashion a prison identity the same way that prisoners do so in *Oz*, but he showed that the program can greatly affect the workings of a cellblock through the way that it can force inmates to act under the guise of ethnic relations. While the program may be ineffective in the creation of new prison identities, as neither Clark Davis, nor Cupcakes develop an identity that is different from the person they came into prison as, the program is shown to still influence the events of life in the prison block. In this case, the program several kinds of anti-social behavior, as seen in numerous fights and Clark Davis's death.

### **Conclusion**

Piñero and Fontana show us that the program can have overarching effects in the lives of inmates in the fictional prisons that they portray. In *Oz*, the program is shown to have a direct influence in the formation of prison identities. In *Short Eyes*, the program is shown to be ineffective in the formation of prison identities, but is also shown to nevertheless be successful in the perpetuation of violent behavior in the prison block. Thus, these two works suggest that one of the characteristics of the self-imposed, social organization system that prisoners impose on themselves is the creation of violent identities that are predisposed toward anti-social behavior. This anti-social behavior, as seen in these works, often leads to longer prison sentences for the inmate who changed as a consequence of the program; however, this detrimental effect of the program does not slow down the immersion of new inmates into the workings of the program. The program, as a form of self-imposed regulatory behavior is able to transcend forward



thinking, advantageous choices and forces inmates to perpetrate acts of violence. The ultimate consequence of the system is that it perpetuates criminal behavior in the prisons that Fontana and Piñero recreate in these two prison dramas.

## EPILOGUE

While *Oz* and *Short Eyes* portray the same process at work—the perpetuation of the prison-industrial complex—they do so for different reasons. *Short Eyes* was first performed in 1974, a time in which groups like the Black Panthers and the Young Lords were seeking to create ideological foot soldiers (Rossini 27). The attempt of groups like The Young Lords and the Black Panthers to increase their membership is well-documented and the way that groups like these seek to not just mobilize a faction to work toward a cause, but rather to indoctrinate the minds of their members into just another ideology has been explored in works like Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. However, we can also see that this ideological pressure was placed on young Puerto Ricans, like Pedro Pietri, playwright and poet, who found solace in theatre. Pietri states, “In 1971, after the Young Lords disbanded and the Black Panthers were on the wane, that’s when I got into theatre. Because all those political organizations— the Black Panthers, the Young Lords, the Movimiento pro Independencia— wanted to control your mind. It was the theater that got back my trust in human nature” (qtd in Rosini 28). Piñero, a contemporary of Pietri, sought to create his own form of intellectual political dissent with *Short Eyes*.

At the end of *Short Eyes* Juan tells the about-to-be-released Cupcakes that during the murder of Davis, he became a “part of these walls... an extra bar on the gate...” and that he is to “remain a number for the rest of [his] life in the street world...” (Piñero 120). Juan concludes the play by informing Cupcakes that his fear of the prison, his fear of the program, “stole [his] spirit” (Piñero 120). The way that the play ends lacks the extravagant show of violence that characterizes *Oz* and instead features a moment of quiet introspection. By singling out the role of

the program in Cupcakes' transformation from petty criminal to murderer, Juan forces the audience to face the role of their own perceptions of prisons and criminals. By denouncing the fear that Cupcakes felt and the fear that Juan did not feel, Juan denounces the role of race and the program in the creation of prison identities. The audience that just sat through watching Cupcakes' complicit actions in the slicing of Clark Davis' throat is forced to ask themselves if they would sacrifice their humanity in order to survive, in the same manner as Cupcakes did.

While it is true that *Oz*, like *Short Eyes*, depicts the process through which inmates are transformed into worse criminals by the racial identification that is motivated by the program, the show does so with such a fetishization for blood and violence that one must question if its motivation is the interruption of the prison's processes of dehumanization or the normalizing of the very process that drives the system. *Oz*'s metanarrative was one which constituted mainly of positive review and critics who applauded the authenticity of the show. Television columnist, Matthew Dietrich, notes that "*Oz* uses freedoms afforded by HBO to show prison life in a frighteningly realistic fashion"; the Boston Globe advertised that, "Another season in *Oz*; The HBO series, set in a fictional but realistic prison, is more hard-edged than anything else on TV"; the columnist Richard Huff wrote that "People often imagine what prison might be like. But for the last three years Tom Fontana's HBO series "*Oz*" has taken viewers right into the belly of the beast" (qtd in Yousman 142). The critical perception of realism, when compared to the actual reality of real-life prisons, provides an interesting point of comparison and the possibility of metanarrative discussions of the role of a television show like *Oz* in our society. By featuring such savage and seemingly unredeemable characters that are loved by critics, what exactly does *Oz* hope to do for real inmates sitting in cells today?

In reality, a show like *Oz* normalizes the fear that drives the perpetuation of the pre-prison perceptions of individuals. When inmates are introduced on the show, the viewer is given four pieces of information about the new character: their name, their crime, their prison number, and their parole date, which is always just a portion of their original prison sentence. So, as the prisoner's brutal crime is being replayed for the audience, they are also being told that these savage individuals will be eligible for re-entry into society in only a few years. If we take the show to be as realistic as the television critics were so fond of saying it was, an audience could argue that prisons are extremely necessary if the extreme degenerates portrayed in the television show are what the average inmate in an American prison is like.

*Oz* is not about disrupting or interrupting the culture of fear that has come to rule the United States and which provides the necessary impetus to fuel the building of one prison after another. It is a fear that drives an \$80 billion a year industry, year after year, and that serves as one of the backbones of the American economy. In the 1970s, Piñero sought to disrupt that trend. Yet over time, we have seen that such attempts have not been fully successful. People can still tune into television shows like *Oz*, *Prison Break*, *Lock Up*, among others to have their fear of other Americans validated every night.

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### BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Gerardo Carlos Martinez grew up in Monterrey, Mexico and McAllen, TX. He graduated from Nikki Rowe High School in 2003, then attended UTPA, where he majored in English. He is currently an English teacher and tennis coach at Sharyland High School. He lives at 2417 Colorado Street in Mission, Texas and can be contacted at [gerardomartinez726@gmail.com](mailto:gerardomartinez726@gmail.com).