



**ARLENE
GOTTFRIED**

& FIREWORKS

Bacalaitos & Fireworks

By Arlene Gottfried

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**This PDF of *Bacalaitos & Fireworks* is only a preview of the entire book.
To see the complete version, please contact Nina Ventura,
Publicity Associate, at nina@powerhousebooks.com**

BACALAITOS & FIREWORKS

for Arlene Gottfried

Loisaida
You are the keeper of fireworks
I left your glitter nights behind
I thought to be free of your fire-brand of hunger
but you clamped the sharp teeth of memory onto my tail.
The tale of my past shadows me
shows me I will never be free of you
even in the now sunlit gray of your forgetful streets
those same streets that kept watch
with my red spiked heels on the stoop
waiting for the eye of midnight to cut the darkness
knowing all the while that death is just a shot away—
the candle heat that liquifies
the time I shoot in my veins—
you hold my time
you and the streets.

In front of Iglesia de Dio de Siete Día
prayers jump out of the tambourines
I was a young bride of ten in my crinoline
and layers of tulle swinging around my hips
I walked past the junkies roasting a pig on the sidewalk
past the rats scurrying from the song of my white patent innocence
I paraded with an army of black virgins like me
believing at my first communion I drank the blood of God
believing the priests who said that wine
was only for homeless bums crawling for chump change on your corners
believing in your power
holding the priests and the winos together
believing my black virgin eyes that told me the world was no bigger
than the picture on my grandmother’s TV screen.

I would go to my grandmother on Sundays
after drinking the blood of God
I would go to her apartment
dodging the pleading hands on your corners.

I would sit on my grandmother’s plastic slipcovered living room chairs
making valentines for a drum beater
the young congero across the way
he haunted your streets sending kisses in the melody of his rhythms
he knew the music of my prayers.
I never knew his real name until
I saw it printed on the ribbons that tied his funeral flowers—
there were red ribbons and white flowers at his funeral—
and you kept all those colors—
the dead man in his casket
not even looking like himself
like the boy I had loved—
you reminded me and I bit my tail
tried to cut you off
and to run from grief I filled my belly with wild seeds
let myself become swollen till I burst from my bride’s dress,
I had no language for anger except confession,
I stood for hours leaning against light posts
I stood and birthed my dreams on you
waiting for lights to go on over my head
unaware that you saw who I was.

And to run from my shadow
I threw on my red blouse
the one with the cuchi-cuchi ruffles around the shoulders—
you kept that blouse too
the gaudy red of it unfaded.

In your closet of fireworks you kept intimate hallucinations of me
jumping to stain the sky with my breath.

—Lois Elaine Griffith, 1991

INTRODUCTION

From my window on New York City’s Lower East Side I could look out and see the Puerto Rican culture I encountered over 30 years earlier, around the same time I began photographing. One night I heard a street vendor on the corner of Avenue C and East 3rd Street calling, “bacalaitos and fireworks”; *bacalaitos*, a fried cod fish indigenous to Puerto Rico, and fireworks, for the Fourth of July weekend. This juxtaposition became etched in my mind—representative of an immigrant population on the streets of America.

The wave of Puerto Rican immigration to America began in the 1950s, with individuals seeking the promise of a better life. The incoming families moved into many different urban areas including the Brooklyn neighborhood where I grew up. I took to the streets with my friends and neighbors, where I learned to dance salsa and speak some Spanish, and when I picked up a camera my friends in the neighborhood became my subjects.

My involvement with the Latino Community has intensified over the years and continues to be very personally important. The work collected here stands as witness to the negative effects of poverty, revealing the pain and alienation, neglect, unexpected pregnancy, single motherhood, drug addiction, crime, incarceration, and the extremely high mortality rate among young people affecting the Puerto Rican community in New York City.

However this book also shows the spirit of a people with a powerful passion for life. Those who survive the ghetto rely on a vibrant and intimate community to help overcome the obstacles and the struggles of everyday living.

—Arlene Gottfried







La Playa en
el Barrio



East 2nd Street









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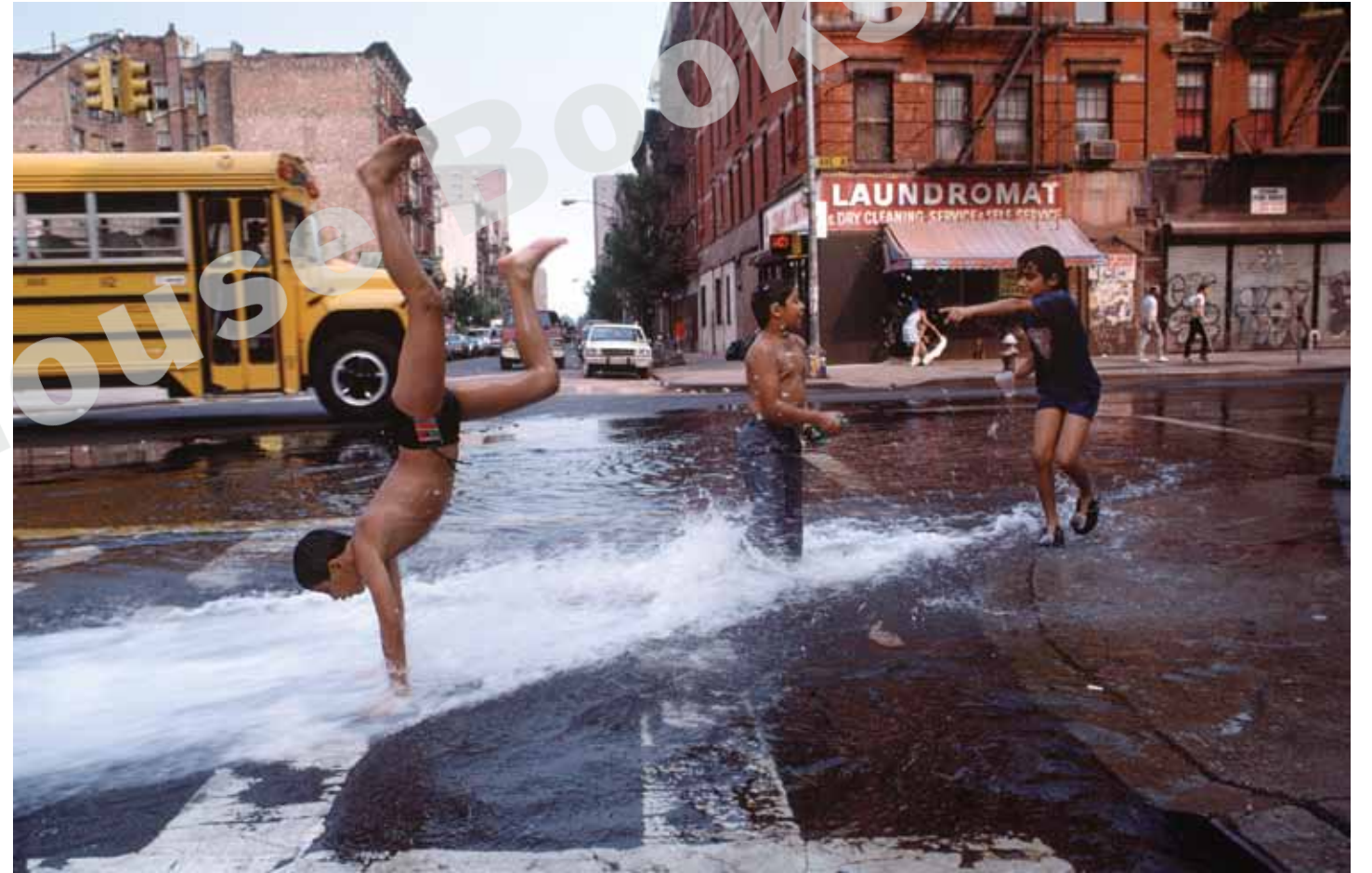
Summer
Afternoon



Villa Toto



East 110th Street



Cartwheels
in Hydrant



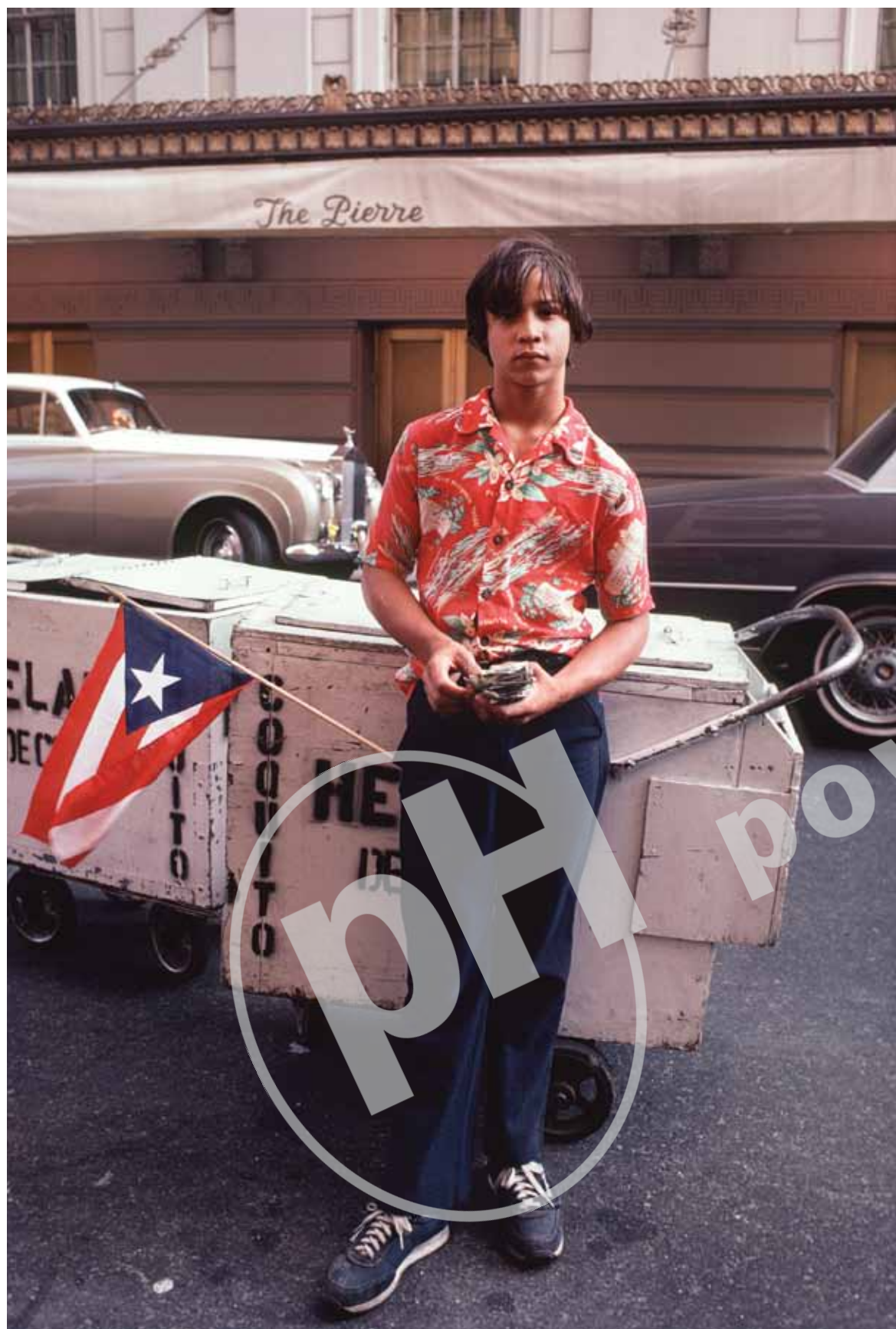
Sitting on
the Stoop



La Ventana

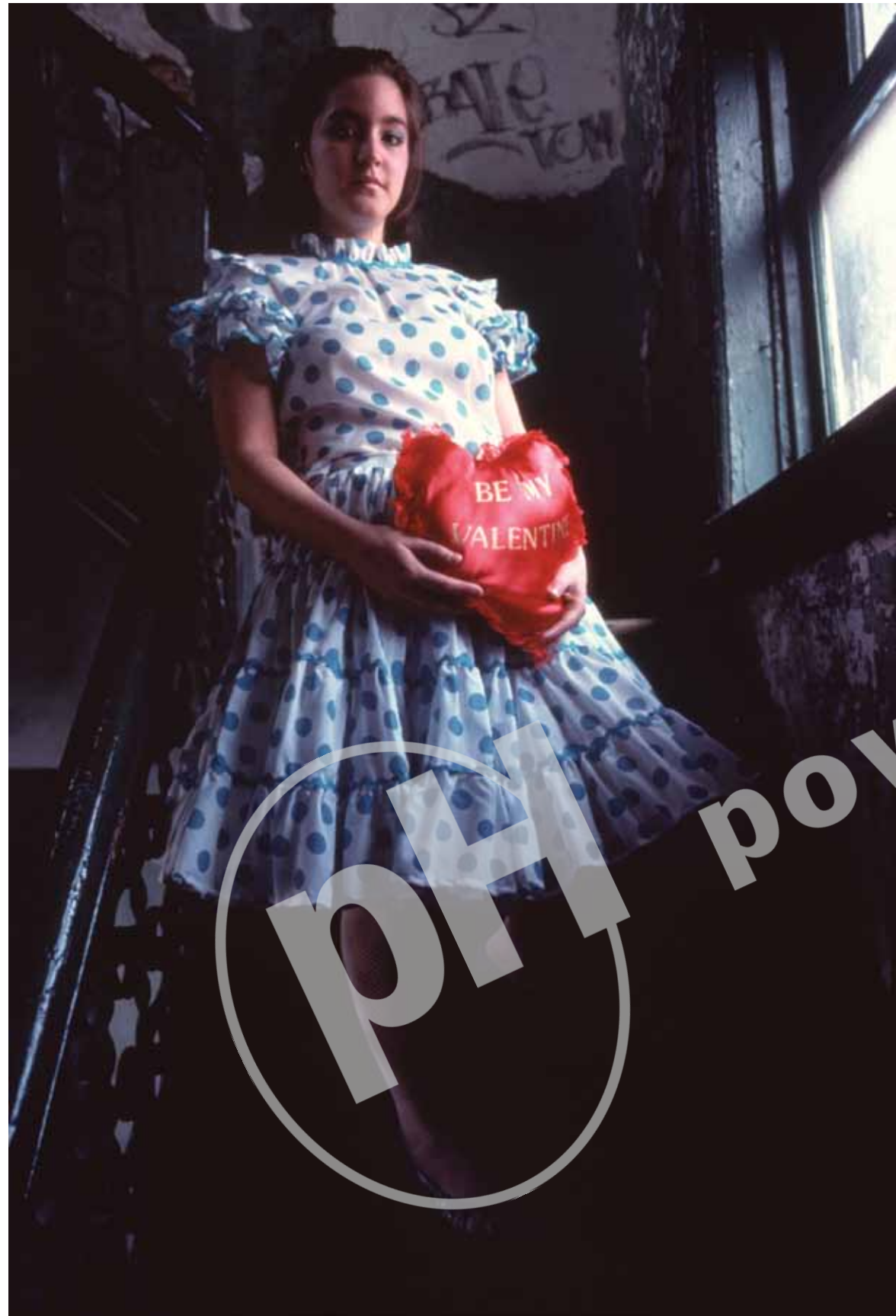




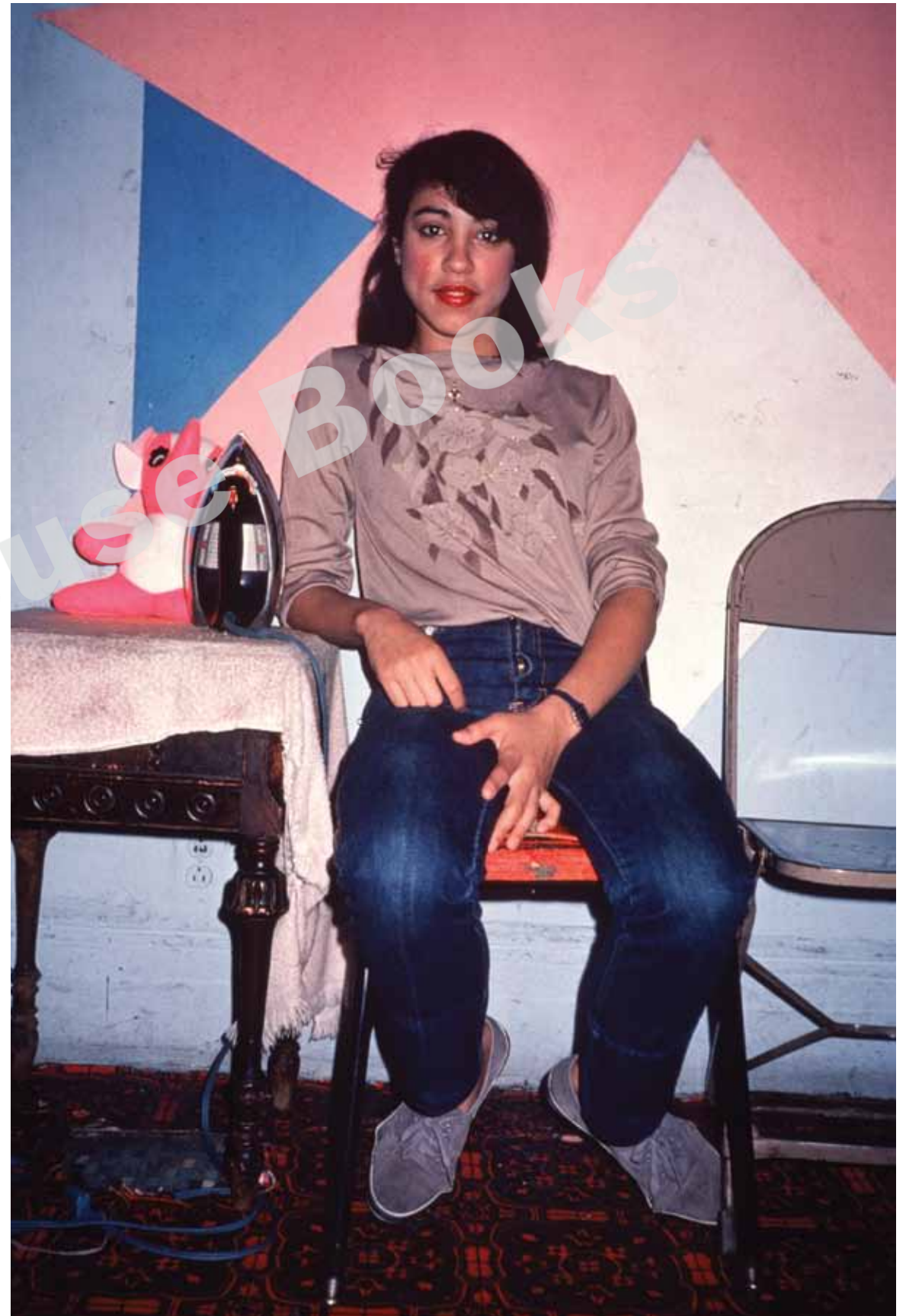
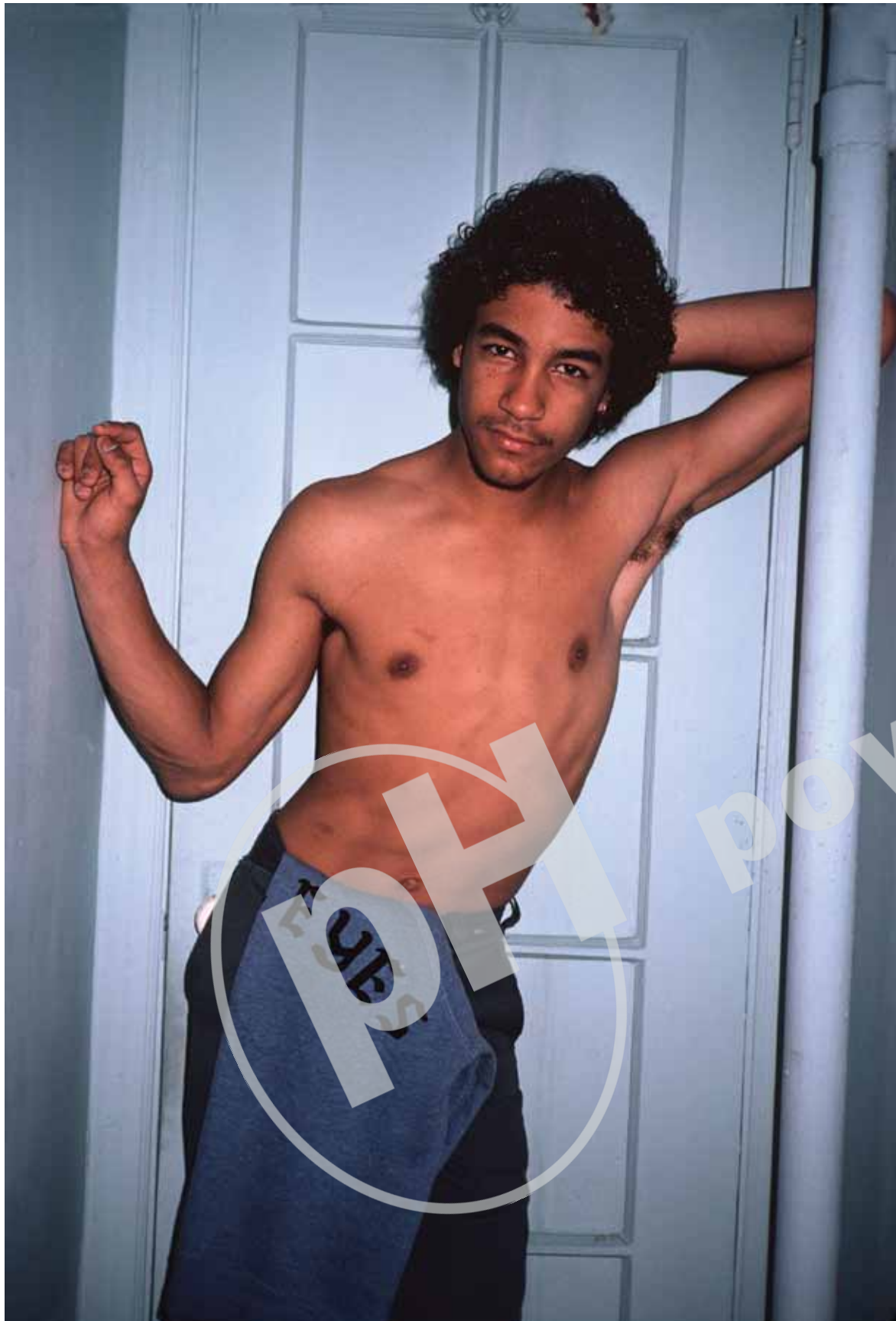


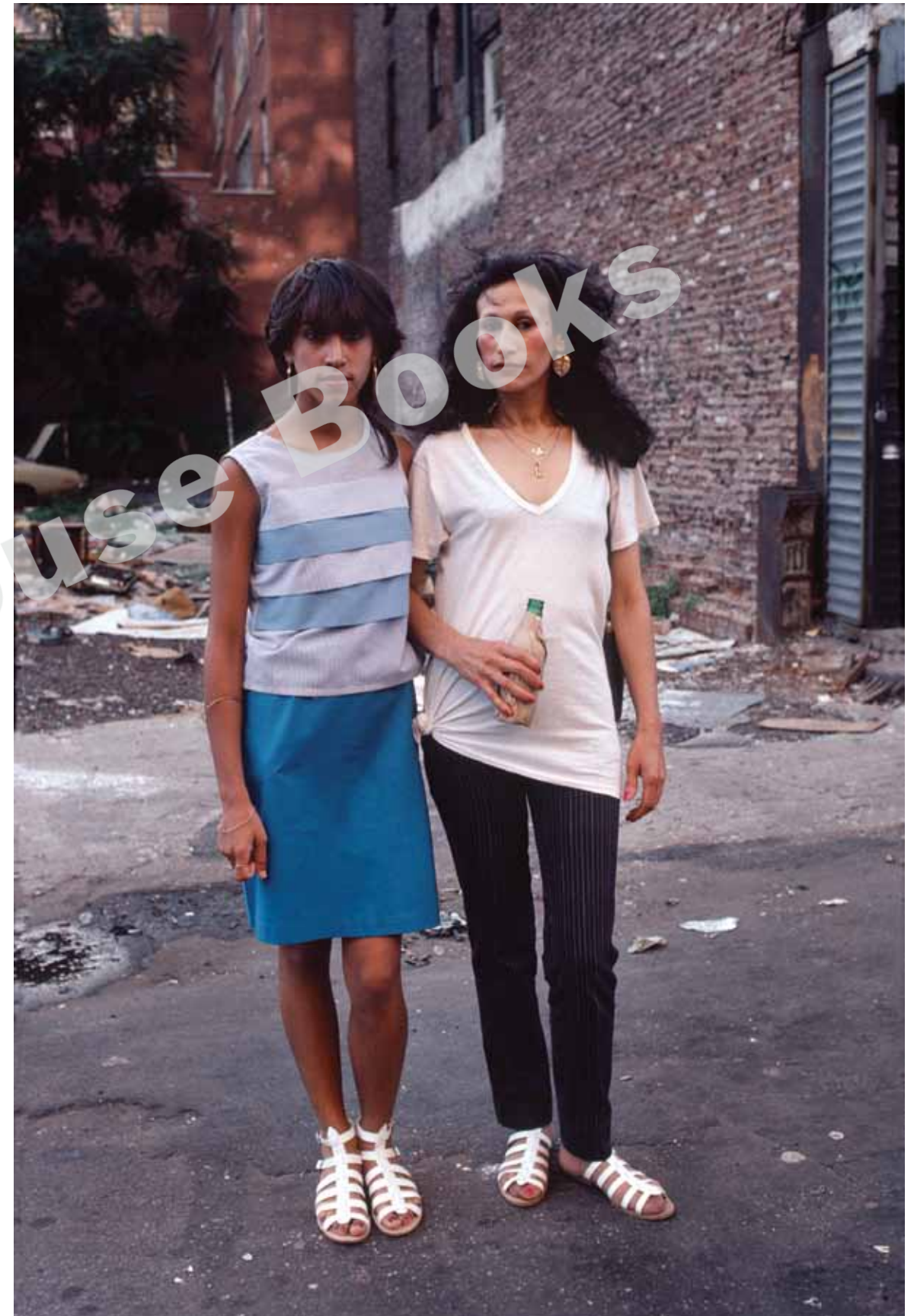
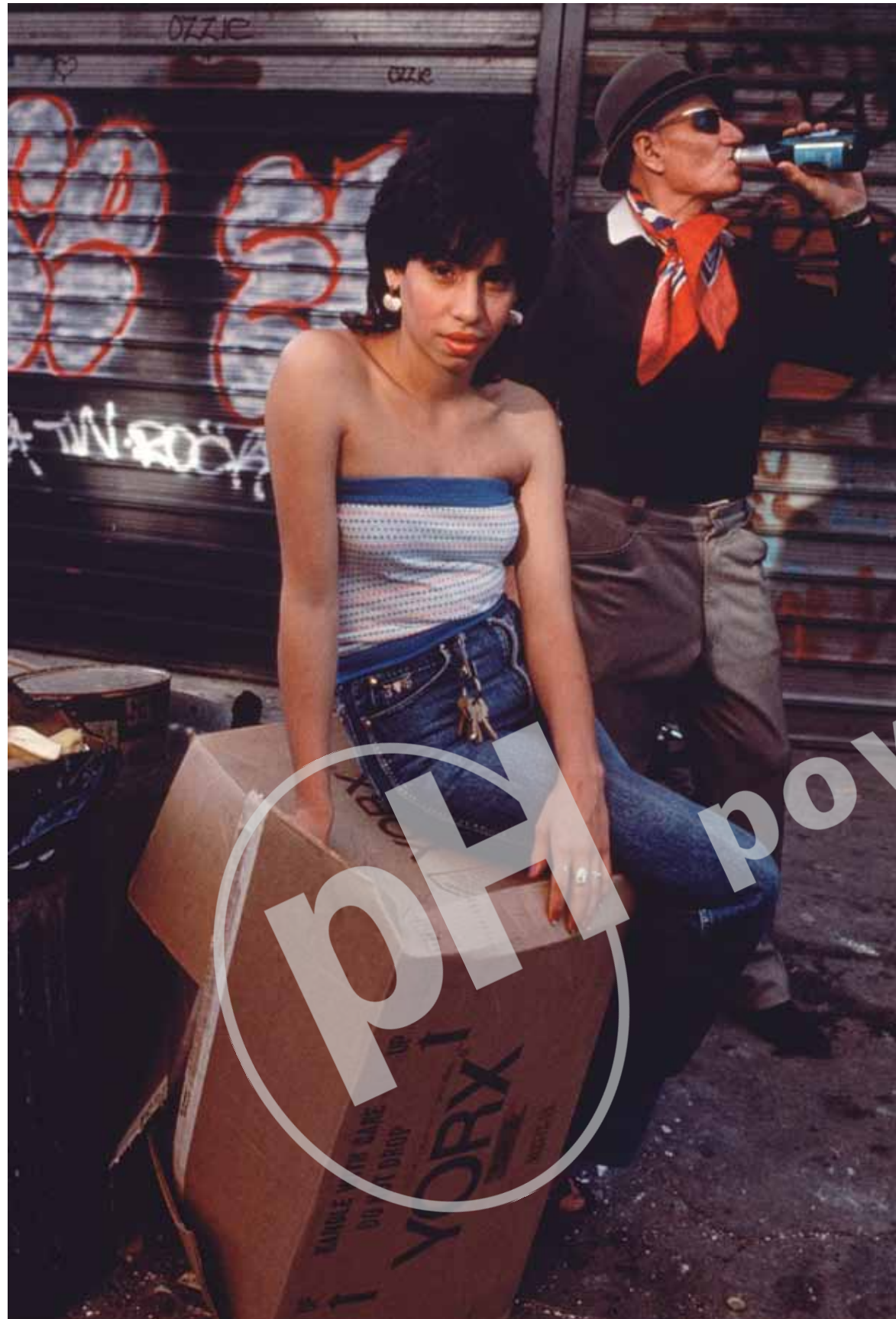


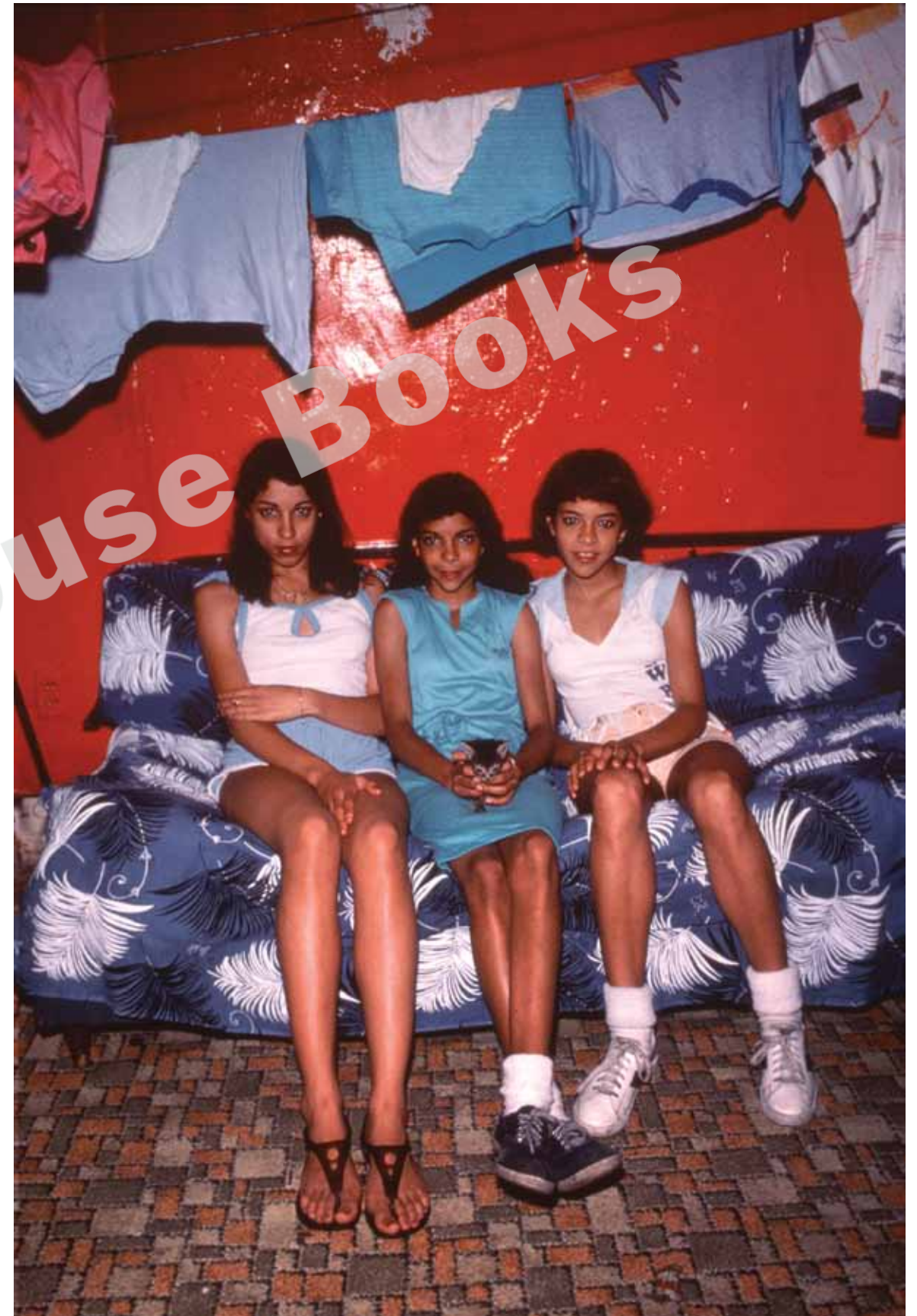
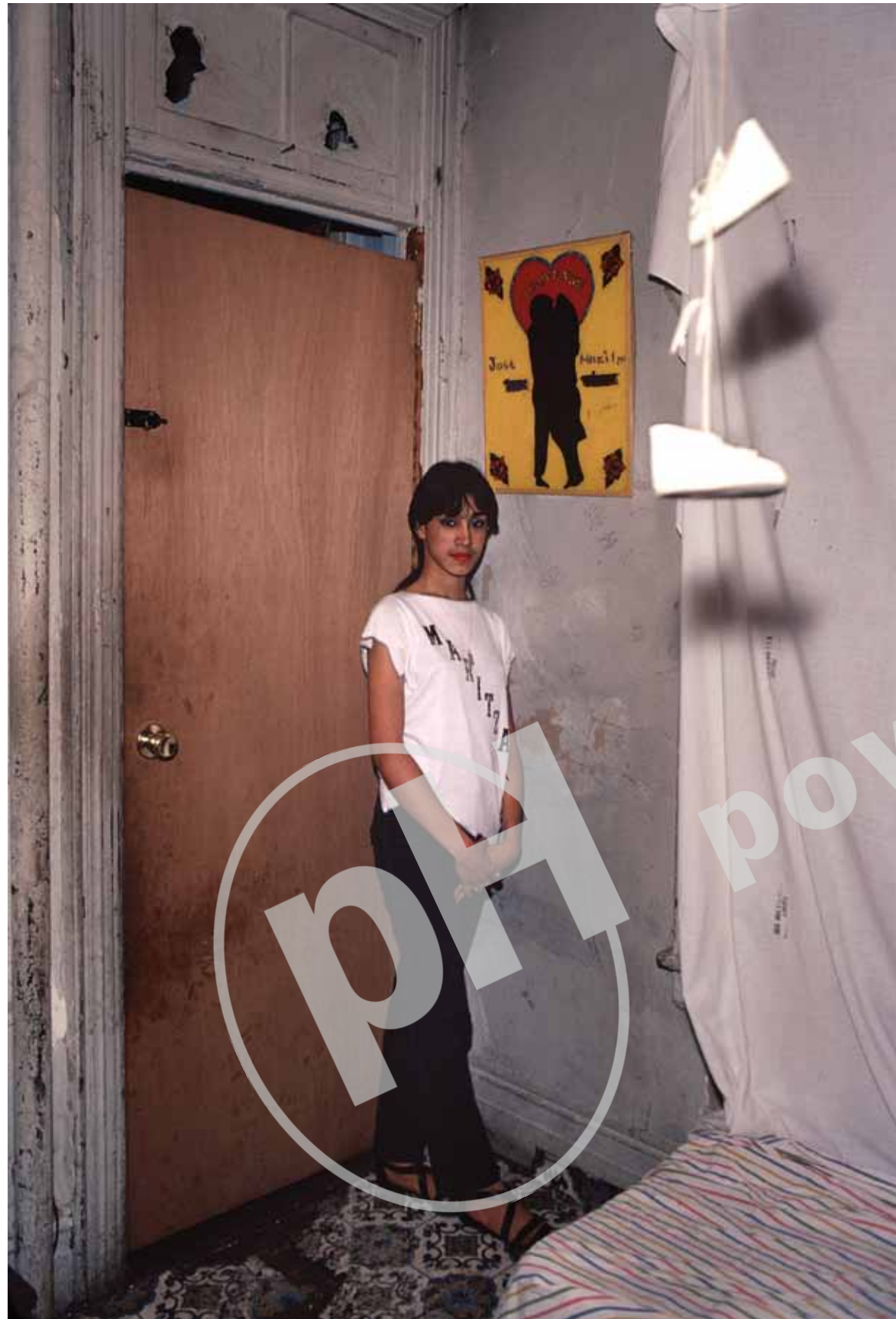


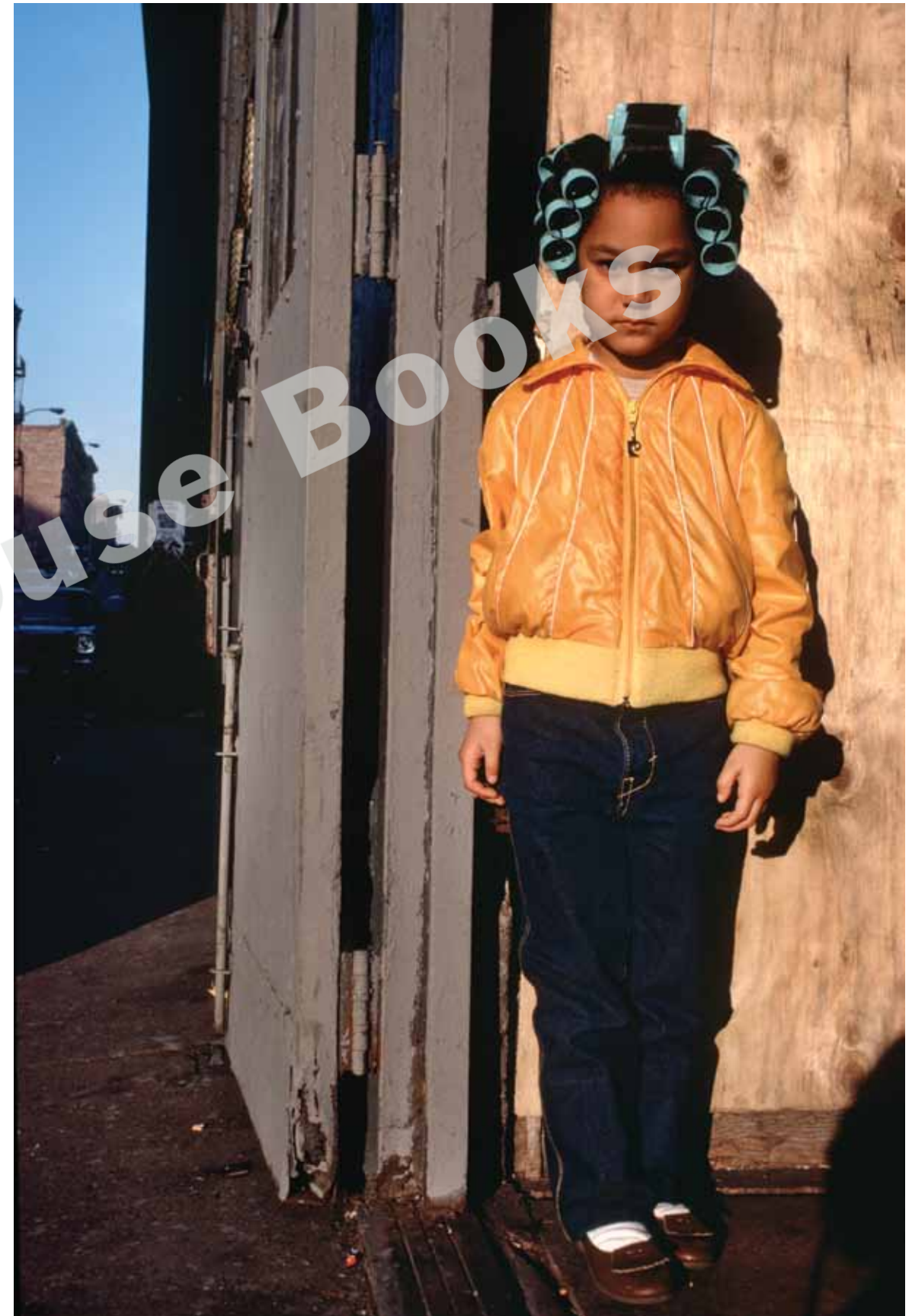
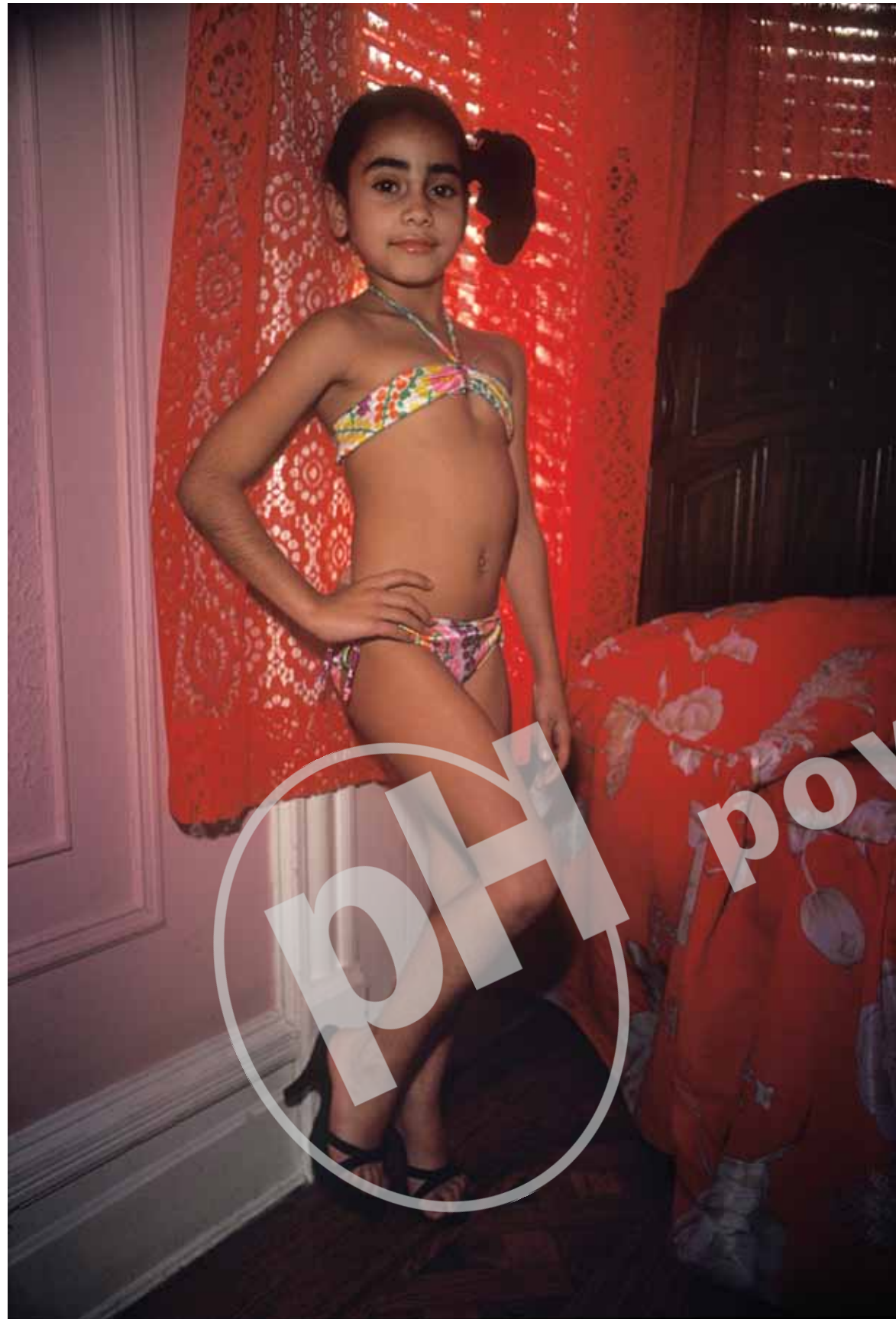












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