

**Neither Here Nor There:
Nuyorican Literature, Home,
and the “American” National Symbolic**

by Monica Brown

Ohio State University

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“Both in Latin American and the United States, Puerto Rico stands for something which cannot be assimilated. It is island and continent, a colony and a nation, a community bound by a language that some Puerto Ricans do not speak.”

Jean Franco

Introduction to *Divided Borders: Essays of Puerto Rican Identity* by Juan Flores.

“Borders, like diasporas, are not just places of imaginative intermingling and happy hybridities for us to celebrate. They are equally minefields, mobile territories of constant clashes with the Eurocenter’s imposition of cultural fixity” (Fusco 1989: 58).

Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedenburg,

Introduction to *Displacement, Diaspora, and Geographies of Identity*.

About the Author: *Monica Brown*

Monica Brown has a B.A. and M.A. in English from the University of California, Santa Barbara and Boston College, respectively. Her awards include the “Helen Earhart Harley Creative Writing Fellowship Award: at Ohio State from the best submission in 1995 by a graduate student, and the “Common Difference Award” from Ohio State University’s Center for Women’s Studies for her paper written about the experiences and contributions of women of color. Brown, who is fluent in Spanish, also has interest in 20th Century American and Multicultural Literature, postcolonial literature, and cultural studies.

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Neither Here Nor There: Nuyorican Literature, Home, and the “American” National Symbolic¹

Anthologizing Puerto Rico

This chapter analyzes the way nationalism, citizenship, and the Puerto Rican diaspora intersect with delinquency and violence, converging upon the “I” that is constructed autobiographically in Piri Thomas’s *Down These Mean Streets*.² Before focusing on the particular, one individual’s attempt to represent the self across racial and national boundaries, I turn to the history of the collective, or the attempts to collectivize, anthologize, and categorize the diverse opus that is Puerto Rican literature. In doing so, I hope to shed light on the way in which attempts at individual “self-representation” via autobiography are necessarily implicated in the way non-white ethnic outgroups are constructed and represented in dominant culture, by and through the nation.

A cursory glance at the titles of four anthologies of Puerto Rican Literature begins to reveal the strategic uses of national identity and the shifting boundaries between the “here” and “there” of island and mainland Puerto Rican cultural expression. In particular, the organization of these anthologies introduces a discussion of nationalism and the “national symbolic” as it is developed in the literature written by Puerto Ricans living in the United States, that “awesome colossus to the north” whose presence “not only lurks... but is manifest in every aspect of national life.”³ *Borinquen: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Literature* (1974), *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words* (1975), *Puerto Rican Writers at Home in the USA* (1991), and *Boricuas: Influential Puerto Rican Writings* (1995) are collections of work written in or translated to English and published in the United States. Each of these anthologies works to establish a “canon” of Puerto Rican literature in the U.S. (where it has often been overlooked and ignored, even in the move toward multicultural curriculum), one that crosses linguistic, geographical, and even national boundaries; and each addresses often attempts to answer questions of national and racial identity and citizenship, issues I will take up throughout this chapter particularly as they are manifested in the autobiographical work of Piri Thomas.

The title of María Teresa Babín’s *Borinquen: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Literature* refers to the original name, “Borinquen,” given to the Island of Puerto Rico by its first inhabitants, the Taino Indians, who descended

from the South American Arawak.⁴ In her introduction, Babín describes the period just before conquest with fictive embellishment and a romanticized primitivism:

*The historical destiny of the greater Antilles was at this early time a vague expectation chanted and danced in the unwritten poetry of movement and color, sounds and rhythms, the ancient language of the wisdom of the people who inhabited the land... the blood and suffering of conquest and resistance made the land somber until the dawn of a new day in which the surviving forces of man and nature gave rise to the first generation born on our soil, the offspring of the Spanish, the Taino, and the African.*⁵

This “new day” dawning is, for Babín and many others, “the birth of our national culture,” and thus the birth of Puerto Rican cultural expression.⁶ The works assembled in Babín’s anthology span centuries – from a “tribal memory” of the 1511 Taino revolt against the Spanish as passed down orally through generations and relayed by a Jíbaro (peasant); to political speeches written by Luis Muñoz Marín, the first elected Puerto Rican governor of the island in 1948; to work by Piri Thomas, Pedro Pietri, and other Nuyorican writers.

Juan Flores, author of *Divided Borders; Essays on Puerto Rican National Identity*, has criticized Babín for what he perceives as a privileging of the somewhat loftier “mother culture” of the island. Flores argues that the “artistic expression of Puerto Ricans in the United States did not accept María Teresa Babín’s version of ‘Borinquen,’... They have drawn their energy and resources from their own [working class] experience, and from other rebellious currents in North American culture, rather than from any spiritualized mythology rooted in the Puerto Rican ‘mother culture.’” Babín’s vision of Puerto Rican Literary expression is an all-inclusive albeit nostalgic one. Her anthology presents a trajectory which makes little distinction between fiction written on the island by upper class Puerto Ricans in Spanish and the literature coming out of El Barrio, and in this respect, Flores is justly critical.

In the 1995 anthology *Boricuas: Influential Puerto Rican Writings*, editor Roberto Santiago, a second generation Puerto Rican born and raised in Spanish Harlem, returns to the island of “Borinquen,” using the term Boricua in a manner different from Babín, illustrating the instability of any one cultural/ethnic signifier. He writes in his introduction:

For years, I was called a Boricua, never knowing what it meant. Boricua was what old men playing dominoes by the candy store called one another between smiles and sips of cold malta. Boricua was what local politicians told everyone in the neighborhood that they were when election time rolled around. Boricua was what nationalist activists chanted when they marched down Fifth Avenue during the Puerto Rican Day Parade. But above all, Boricua was the word that turned strangers into friends when used as a greeting.⁸

Though Santiago comes to understand the historical significance of the term Boricua, his early feelings toward the idea of “Boricua” reveal the way common signifiers can be used to create coalitions and to shore up nationalism in the name of both progressive social movements and manipulative politicians. Like Babín, Santiago anthologizes works of poetry, fiction, political speeches and essays – written by both mainland and island writers, and translated into English. Babín and Santiago construct a Puerto Rican literary heritage rooted in an island past and shared by contemporary writers on the island and the mainland. Among the works represented are pieces in English, Spanish (translated into English), and bilingual (usually untranslated) pieces.

If the titles of Babín’s and Santiago’s anthologies recall Puerto Rico’s indigenous past, conquest, and, implicitly, the Island’s continued colonization, Miguel Alagarin and Miguel Piñeros’ *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings* evokes the struggle of first and second-generation Puerto Ricans to forge their own sense of identity.⁹ The term “Nuyorican” has had shifting historical connotations, both negative and positive. Along with the more “geographically inclusive” term “Neorican,” it has been used pejoratively by islanders and others as a way to describe those living in “the north.”¹⁰ However, these terms have also been used as markers of cultural pride. In the context of this anthology, “Nuyorican” signifies a specific literary

movement and historical moment begun by second-generation Puerto Rican writers living in New York, beginning in the late 1960’s, spanning the 1970’s, and arguably continuing today through such venues as the Nuyorican Poets Cafe in New York City. Frances Aparicio notes that the Nuyorican movement “was mostly constituted by social and political poetry which loudly belied the myth of the American Dream and denounced the subhuman conditions to which Puerto Ricans have been submitted since their massive arrival in the 1940’s.”¹² In the introduction to *Nuyorican Poetry*, Miguel Algarín argues that,

The experience of Puerto Ricans on the streets of New York has caused a new language to grow: Nuyorican. The Nuyoricans are a special experience in the immigration history of the city of New York... There is at the edge of every empire a linguistic explosion that results from the many multilingual tribes that collect around wealth and power. The Nuyorican is a slave class that trades hours for dollars at the lowest rung of the earning scale. The poems in this anthology document the conditions of survival...¹²

These revolutionary writers were/are able to speak out, Aparicio argues, in part because of “the liberatory and radicalizing conditions set forth by the Civil Rights Movement, the Black movement and the revolutionary praxis of the 60’s.”¹³

Finally, *Puerto Rican Writers at Home in the USA*,” a recent anthology edited by Faythe Turner, brings together work by authors who, with one exception, were born or arrived in the continental United States after World War II. Absent from Turner’s anthology are English translations (such as those included in Babín’s and Santiago’s anthologies) of works by island-based authors. Her primary focus is on the Nuyorican writers of the 1960’s and 1970’s, to the present. Turner includes in her anthology all the major Nuyorican writers, but extends the geographic scope by including Puerto Rican writers writing in places such as Georgia, Kentucky, and Massachusetts (Judith Ortiz Cofer, Luz María Umpierre, and Rosario Morales, respectively). Considering the rampant economic exploitation and racial discrimination decried in the poetry and fiction represented in Turner’s anthology, and experienced by the majority of Puerto Ricans upon arrival in the United States, it is difficult to imagine Puerto Rican writers “at home” in the United States in any traditional sense. Although Puerto Ricans were

“granted” citizenship through the imposition of the Jones Act of 1917, they have been historically denied equal access to the rights of citizenship. Dorinne Kondo argues that “‘Home,’ for many people on the margins, is, to paraphrase Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, that which we cannot want. It stands for a safe place, where there is not need to explain oneself to outsiders; it stands for community.”¹⁴ Turner’s use of the phrase “At Home in the USA” may in fact be a play on the radical disjunction between the non-immigrant status of Puerto Ricans as legal citizens of the United States and the long history of Puerto Rico’s colonization by the United States, resulting in the “translocation of workers from the colony to the metropolis where colonial conditions are reproduced.”¹⁵ She could also be referring to the generations of Puerto Ricans, living in New York and elsewhere, who, despite marginalization by dominant culture, have indeed made the “USA” their home, in small part through the use of signifiers such as “boricua” and “Nuyorican” to signal community and mark out a *home* space.¹⁶

In literature written by Puerto Ricans, and other diasporic, displaced and marginalized peoples in the United States, there is a recurring nostalgia for a “home” that is the island, and “a past golden age that never was, a nostalgia that elides exclusion, power relations, and difference,”¹⁷ what Piri Thomas’s first-generation immigrant mother evoked as “Puerto Rican paradise.” What is also made evident in Thomas’s autobiography *Down These Mean Streets* is an alternative path to the marking out of home as a psychic and literal space: the establishment of street gangs, marking certain “home” turf and territory, to be defended at all costs. Again and again in the literature depicting the gang experience, violent acts are defended as a means of “protecting” one’s home – in Piri’s case, the mean streets of Spanish Harlem. Thomas’ work gives us insight into the world of delinquent youth. These youth, excluded and disenfranchised from traditional conceptions of citizenship, look for other viable alternatives in their search for a stable sense of identity, belonging, and respect. *Down These Mean Streets* reveals the ways membership in youth gangs and delinquent behavior present such alternatives in their construction of a “home” space through territorial practices.

In this essay, I hope to engage certain theories of nationalism; the call to do so comes from texts by Piri Thomas and other U.S. “minority” authors. My approach to “nation” draws upon the work of theorists such as Benedict Anderson, Lauren Berlant, Homi Bhabha, Juan Flores, and others attempting to theorize “nation” and/or the “national symbolic,” but is also informed by historical considerations specific to the case of Nuyorican liter-

ature. Why choose one delineated urban space, New York City, as the focus of my study, particularly after the dismantling by various postcolonial theorists of an idea of nation fixed to any one territorial space? In part because I agree with Judith Freidenberg’s assessment of East Harlem as an urban space which has served as “home” to successive immigrants, from the Irish to the Italian to those from the Southern United States, as a particularly apt “metaphor” for “other markers of social stratification in the United States,”¹⁸ and because the push to do so is found repeatedly in urban narratives depicting the gang experience. Throughout Thomas’ work, turf, territory, and “home” spaces are defended, “conquered” and imbued with passionate cultural nationalisms. It is precisely this phenomenon of marked territories and articulated nationalism – vital, nostalgic or otherwise, which I wish to explore.

It may seem obvious that terms such as “home” and “nation” are not neutral or innocent words, yet they continue to be appropriated for political ends and give structure to the social world. Such terms, depending on the origin of their deployment, can not only provide structure, but are structuring. For example, while the use of *At Home in the USA* by Faythe Turner is a way of asserting the legitimacy of Puerto Rican presence and influence on U.S. culture and politics, the same rhetoric of home can be used as a means of exclusion and as an homogenizing discourse whereby the dominant culture’s construction of “our nation,” must be protected from the influx of “them,” outsiders who are waiting to invade “our” home, take “our” jobs, commit crimes, and go on welfare.

Benedict Anderson has defined the concept of nation as “an imagined political community,” with “deep horizontal comradeship,” a fraternity that Anderson argues enables so many million people, not so much to kill, as to be “willing to die for such imaginings.”¹⁹ Anderson’s theorizing of nation begins to explain why the concept of nation has been both a positive and destructive force among Puerto Ricans. Especially useful to my discussion will be the concept of the “National Symbolic,” defined by Lauren Berlant as:

*The order of discursive practices whose reign within a national space produces, and also refers to, the “law” in which the accident of birth within a geographic/ political boundary transforms individuals into subjects of a collectively held history. Its traditional icons, its metaphors, its heroes, its rituals, and its narratives provide an alphabet for a collective consciousness or national subjectivity.*²⁰

If, as Berlant argues, “the modern nation installs itself within the memory and conscience” of citizens, then one wonders whether there is or can be a shared national symbolic that crosses racial/class lines.²¹ A history of racial discrimination makes it evident that certain members of society are necessarily excluded. Anthropologists have explained the ways “residence in a low income area augments the difficulties of daily living: not only are the residents’ needs greater but access to services and entitlements (Sexton 1965; de Ortiz 1992) becomes more problematic.”²² Overwhelmingly, studies reveal that in lower income urban enclaves populated primarily by Blacks and Latinos, there are clear patterns of poverty, high rates of homicide, earlier high school drop out rates, increased teen pregnancies and increased number of deaths due to AIDS and drugs.²³ It is undeniable that such experiences, reflecting class and racial boundaries, disrupt the “shared” experience of an “American” National Symbolic and access to “equal” rights and privileges of citizenship.

Berlant has noted that the term “citizen” functions both as “an inclusive and an exclusionary noun, naming by negation juridically contested racial, gendered, and class identities.”²⁴ One question we might ask in relation to the Thomas family is whether or not “light-skinned” Puerto Ricans who may “pass,” are more likely to be assimilated into the American National Symbolic. In his discussion of “national culture” in *Divided Borders: Essays on Puerto Rican Identity*, Flores addresses and revises Berlant’s theorization of the “National Symbolic” by using the emergence of working class expression to disrupt a national symbolic/culture that is “understood as an essentially psychological, religious, anthropological, biological or ethnic entity, fixed in time and attached ineradicably to a group of people in some monolithic totality.”²⁵ It is through these categories, Flores argues, that “the ruling classes of all nations stamp and circumscribe the ‘psyche’ of those within the national economic unit at their command; ‘national culture’ is defined and fashioned after their historically dominant image so as to serve their historically governing interests.”²⁶ The immutability or malleability, is, according to Flores, entirely contingent upon the demands of the marketplace, and thus any approach to culture must be grounded in the dynamic of class struggle. He writes:

*The working class is the only force capable of carrying the anti-colonial struggle through to its completion. Puerto Rican national culture, then, if it is to be viewed as the ascendant culture standing in most radical opposition to that being imposed by imperialism, should correspond largely to the developing cultural manifestation, and “identity” of the working class.*²⁷

The nation signifies different things to Puerto Ricans across racial and class lines. All Puerto Ricans living in the U.S. are not from, or currently a part of, the lower class. Edna Acosta-Belen echoes Flores, offering a specific analysis of the ways literary works by writers/poets, such as Rosario Morales and Tato Laviera, affirm difference in “a unique cultural synthesis which redefines identity and replaces Anglo-American ethnocentrism with a syncretic multiculturalism rooted in popular culture and the working class experience.”²⁸ In contrast, however, Frances Aparicio argues that the literature of the island explores “the national issue of the political status of Puerto Rico, while in the literature of the United States Puerto Ricans may be contextualized within the latter’s ethnic movements and its accompanying racial issues.”²⁹ I would, to a certain extent, like to complicate her separation of these two impulses. While the Nuyorican literary movement does address the immediate concerns of racism and poverty in the U.S., the issue of national autonomy for Puerto Ricans is also manifest. The fact that the Nuyorican literary “revolution” came out of, in part, the civil rights movement, does not erase the complicated issues of nationalism that are manifest in the cultural expression. This is especially true in the case of Piri Thomas.

For Nuyoricans, or Neoricans, a “background of uninterrupted colonial bondage serves to crystallize the search for Puerto Rican national identity,”³⁰ and theirs is a literature “of straddling... operative within and between two national literatures and marginal in both.”³¹ I explore this continuing and complicated negotiation between here and there of the United States and Puerto Rican National culture through an analysis of Piri Thomas’ *Down These Mean Streets*, a seminal Nuyorican autobiography set in Spanish Harlem.

The influence Piri Thomas has had on Puerto Rican writing in the United States is immeasurable. The most widely read Puerto Rican writer in the United States, he was also the first (and to date, among the few) to successfully “cross over” into mainstream publishing (his first three books were published by Doubleday and

Knopf). Evidence of his influence on second and third-generation Puerto Ricans can be found in the introductions to the two recent anthologies of Puerto Rican Writings mentioned earlier. Faythe Turner (*Puerto Rican Writers At Home in the USA*) writes, “My journey into Puerto Rican culture began after reading Piri Thomas’ autobiographical narrative, *Down These Mean Streets*. Later, when I wrote asking if I might meet and talk with him about his work, he graciously invited me to his home in New York City... Through him I became acquainted with many of the Puerto Rican writers in New York...” (1) Robert Santiago *Boricuas: Influential Puerto Rican Writings* notes, “as fate would have it, the first book *Down These Mean Streets* I read by a Puerto Rican author was the one the Jesuits at Xavier had denounced as pornographic and prejudiced against whites. I knew it had to be good. It was.”³² Through reading *Down These Mean Streets*, Santiago, along with thousands of other young Puerto Ricans, “no longer felt alone. Through Piri Thomas’ pain I was able to relive what I had so long suppressed, and this gave me new strength.”³³

“Fine American Names”: Becoming/ Resisting America(n)

In *Down These Mean Streets*, Piri Thomas recounts life growing up in El Barrio during the 1940’s and 1950’s and attempts to negotiate between the “here” of Spanish Harlem and the “there” of his mother’s island paradise. Working in factories under miserable conditions, his parents barely make enough to survive in New York City, and Piri’s mother often fantasizes about returning to the island of Puerto Rico. In an early chapter called “Puerto Rican Paradise,” Piri’s mother, in the midst of a freezing winter, tells the children “how great it was, and how she’d like to go back one day, and how it was warm all the time there and no matter how poor you were over there, you could always live on green bananas, bacalao, and rice and beans”(9). The children internalize the nostalgic fantasy and ask to hear more and more about the “golden color of the morning sky” and the “pajaritos making all the música” (9). Born in the United States in el barrio, where warmth and food can be scarce, Piri and his brothers and sisters see Puerto Rico as a mythical place, where people love one another and share with each other, in sharp contrast to the U.S., where, according to Piri’s mother, “there is snow in the hearts of the people”(10).

Despite his delight in his mother’s “Puerto Rican Paradise,” Piri, as a small child, feels the pull towards an idea of America, its icons and historical narratives. Recalling his early recitals of the national anthem, he writes, “I used to go to general assembly all togged out with a white shirt and red tie... when they played the national anthem, I would put my hand over my heart. It made me feel great to blast out: My country, ‘tis of thee, Sweet land of liberty, Of thee I sing” (123). What Piri experiences as a child dressed as other children and singing the same words is “the feeling of simultaneity” that can be achieved most effectively, according to Anderson, through poetry and song because there is a “special kind of contemporaneous community that language alone suggests”(145). However, by the time Piri reaches young adulthood, having experienced the effects of his father’s internalized racism within his home and discrimination from the larger community, he is (so to speak), singing a different tune, noting to his friend that he doesn’t hate all paddies, “Just their color, their damn claim that white is the national anthem of the world” (122). Piri rejects the symbolism expressed in the national anthem, stating that “now when I hear it played I can’t help feeling that it’s only meant for paddies. It’s their national anthem, their sweet land of liberty” (122). The anthem continues to take on central symbolic significance to Piri, who evokes it again in the second volume of his autobiography, *Savior, Savior, Hold My Hand*, wondering “When are they gonna stop thinking that White is the National Anthem of the whole world?” (226). Years later, Piri returns to these ideas in his reflections on the bicentennial, asking, “My Country ‘tis of Thee Sweet Land of Liberty, of whom, to whom, do we sing?” eventually leading him to (re)write his own national narrative.³⁴ As a small child, Piri is interpellated into patriotic allegiance through the experience of singing the anthem, but as an adult he reinterprets this experience, saying, “I have sung My Country ‘tis of Thee” as a child in ghetto schools. I know now, as a descendant of Puerto Ricans, that I was singing not of this country but of Puerto Rico. I was born in a colonial, neo-slavery society. My mother, my father, my three brothers, all died victims of an uncaring society, victims of the ghetto principle.”³⁵

Through the example of his own father, Piri learns the cost of various claims of community and citizenship. His Cuban-born father and namesake immigrated first to Puerto Rico and then to New York, where he married a light-skinned “Spanish” Puerto Rican. Although he adopts a Puerto Rican national identity, his father’s dark skin, flat nose, and wiry hair lead Piri to question the racial background the elder Thomas has constructed, con-

cluding that his father has some *moyeto*, or African blood, in him. His father is threatened by Piri's questions and claims that his skin color is a result of "Indian" blood. Piri, however, is well aware that due to the slave trade that ran through the Caribbean basin, "virtually all Puerto Rican citizens have some African blood in their veins."³⁶ It is only after Piri becomes painfully aware that his father favors his light-skinned siblings, that he learns of his father's internalized racism. Often mistaken for black and not allowed in certain places, Piri's father reacts by exaggerating his accent and Spanish identity, adopting a hyper-Puerto Riqueño persona, making himself into "more a Puerto Rican than the most Puerto Rican there ever was" (153). At times, however, a mere assertion of roots in Puerto Rico is not enough to convince those questioning his ethnicity. When questioned about his lack of a Spanish surname, Piri's father would reply, "My father was so proud to be an American that he named all his children with fine American names," a reply that is totally fictitious and a source of personal shame. Piri's father notes, "God, I felt like a *puta*, every time. A damn nothing" (153).

Clara E. Rodríguez argues that the transition from Puerto Rico to the United States often produces such crises of racial identity, because "in Puerto Rico, racial identification is subordinate to cultural identification, while in the U.S. racial identification, to a large extent, determines cultural identification."³⁷ In a climactic confrontation with his father where Piri demands to know why his father favors his light-skinned siblings more, his father finally confesses that perhaps he has given preferential treatment to his lighter children, explaining, "I ain't got one colored friend... at least no one American Negro friend. Only dark ones I got are Puerto Ricans or Cubans. I'm not a stupid man. I saw the look of white people on me when I was a young man, when I walked into a place where dark skin wasn't supposed to be" (153). His experiences illustrate the ways the visible markers of race can supersede the privileges of any national identification or claim of American citizenship, offering some support to Aparicio's claim that for Puerto Ricans writing and living in the U.S., racial issues are primary. In his embodiment of dual "nationalities," Piri's father represses and rewrites his own racial and national history, feeling like a "puta" (whore), but freer to walk and shop where he chooses. He finds it impossible to walk the streets freely as a "colored" American, but feels more accepted as a "Puerto Rican," with some "Indian" blood.

Piri, in contrast, is rejected by and rejects the liminal membership his father had within an "American" national culture and looks elsewhere in his search for a stable identity, turning to the one place that is "home", the streets. The only stable vision of community, of collective consciousness available to him, is what Piri finds on the mean streets of Spanish Harlem with "the boys" in his gang. Within the gang, their rituals and identification of heroes, their shared history of battles for turf, territory, and most importantly, "respect," Piri achieves the experience of belonging. The imagining of community within the world of Piri's gang is very much a fraternal enterprise in that membership in these street gangs is dependent on a concept of hyper-masculinity, which is constructed through a variety of rituals, from being jumped in, to proving himself in combat, to "copping girl's drawers." In Piri's gang, members proved they had "heart" by crossing over into the threatening realm of same-sex intercourse, though this test takes place with transvestites who are presented as effeminate and passive caricatures, thereby lessening the threat to the gang member's masculinity.

The boys must walk, talk, and act alike. This construction of masculinity, defined within the community as becoming "un hombre," is at the center of street ideology. Piri, who is the "war counselor" for his gang, must always be mentally prepared to fight. To do so he begins with an internal chant, "*I'm tough enough. I've got much corazón, I'm king wherever I go... no punk out, no die out, walk bad; be down, cool breeze, smooth. My mind raced, and thoughts crashed against each other, trying to reassemble themselves into a pattern of rep*" (48). This "pattern of rep" that Piri strives to invoke and assemble is what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has called "bodily hexis," a politics and ideology of the street embodied, "turned into a permanent disposition, a durable way of standing, speaking, walking and thereby feeling and thinking."³⁸

The "law" of the street is also the law of turf and territory because the nation must have a location and any sort of "national" identity depends on a certain construction of space, of territories and borders. For instance, when Piri's family moves a few blocks to a street dominated by Italians, Piri is constantly harassed, beaten, and almost blinded. Despite their proximity his "boys" are no help to him, because he now lives on the wrong side of the border, in what he calls "their country" (29). Piri writes:

I kept wishing those [Italian] cats went to the same school I went to, a school that was on the border between their country and mine, and I had amigos there, there I could count on them. But I couldn't ask two or three amigos to break into Rocky's block and help me mess up his boys. I knew 'cause I had asked them already. They had turned me down fast, and I couldn't blame them. (29)

The ideology behind the gang's loyalty to the physical terrain of their ethnically homogeneous neighborhood and the street turf that they claim as "home," (Eugene Mohr calls each gang a "little fascist state")³⁹ reflects at a micro-level the false notion that "there is a homology between a culture, a people, or a nation and its particular terrain, and both the culture and its associated place are regarded as homogeneous in relation to other cultures/places."⁴⁰ Postcolonial critics have attempted to deconstruct these nationalistic notions of space, identity and place, in particular the binary between the West as "here" and the non-west as "out there."⁴¹ New York City may be the "Big Apple" in the eyes of many Americans, a shared national symbol, but Piri's neighborhood is marked as "Spanish Harlem," his enemy's as "Little Italy." The city is a place of borders and diasporic peoples. Lavie, Swedenburg, and Kondo have all highlighted the ways Eurocentric spatial constructs have been fractured from within and without by third world nationalisms, as well as emancipatory movements within the United States. There seems to be a panic surrounding the fissuring of a stable notion of a "home" space in the United States, evidenced by proponents of the English-only movement, anti-affirmative action movements, and biased portrayals of resident "aliens" and urban minority youth. Yet the Puerto Rican youth in *el barrio* depicted in *Down These Mean Streets* and other urban gang narratives are violently patriotic in their loyalties to their particular turf and territory. Could this be simply a reflection of the dominant construction of cultural and national spaces?

Another aspect of street life that dominates Piri's childhood is stealing. Piri and his gang buy into the ideal of the American dream, but soon realize that they won't be able to make their fortune shining shoes at fifteen cents a pop. They perceive that the only available avenues are illegal. "In Harlem," Piri explains, "stealing was like natural" (73). As Thomas has commented elsewhere, "Even a ten-year-old ghetto kid knows nowadays that to the system, if you're not of its ruling structure, no matter what your color

or language may be, we're all niggers and spics and wops and kikes..."⁴² Piri begins by robbing supermarkets for lemons and sugar to sell at a lemonade stand with his "boys," and graduates to armed robberies in bars and clubs, which eventually lands him in prison serving a seven-year sentence. The stories Thomas recounts of his early gang experiences support the "Social Disorganization" theory of deviance, which argues that gangs are most likely to develop in areas marked by extensive poverty and without constructive channels for youth such as adequate school systems or afterschool sports programs. Social disorganization theory argues that gangs are "an elementary form of social organization that emerges to create order where there is none." While gang membership is, ultimately self-destructive, it fulfills a need, however high the price, for community, respect, acceptance and most emphatically "home."⁴³ To be part of a gang is to make the streets home and to resist the poverty and failure that gang members may see as their legacy.

For Piri and his boys, the gang functions, in part, to provide the structure of community membership and citizenship necessary for a sense of well being and belonging promised but withheld by the "American" nation. Berlant points to the landmark 1958 case where the Supreme Court "ruled that it would be cruel and unusual punishment to strip a citizen of his national identity," which leads me to wonder about those (in Piri's case, second generation Puerto Rican youth) who are "stripped" of any sort of stable fantasy of "national" identity from birth.⁴⁴ Like Berlant, I don't assume that a "stable" relationship between Nation and individual is possible; rather, I am arguing that making citizens – the creating of national subjects – is a complicated process of ideological negotiation, especially for those who are marginalized within and by the nation. As the son of Puerto Rican immigrants, Piri Thomas has the official status of U.S. citizenship, but his position, and that of his family, is necessarily liminal because, as Homi Bhabha points out, immigrants (or those, like Piri, perceived as such) "will not be contained within the Heim of the national culture and its unisonant discourse, but are themselves the marks of a shifting boundary that alienates the frontiers of the modern nation."⁴⁵ One of the ways Piri is able to resist the unisonant discourse, is by creating a space where he is no longer an "alien," a place where he is essential, not liminal. Immediately after being "jumped in" (an initiation through violence) by his gang, he achieves a sense of belonging: "Shit, I had been scared, but that was over. I was in; it was my block now." (51)

The idea of “manhood,” the becoming of *un hombre*, is part of what bonds the boys in the gang together – the discourse of masculinity empowers them, making them feel able to resist the unisonant discourse of dominant culture. Unfortunately, their construction of masculinity depends upon the subjection of other groups, women in particular. For the boys in Piri’s gang, strength must be tested on bodies, through sexual conquest of women and transvestites and the conquest of other men/boys in battle.

If the smallest slight from his father can serve to enrage Piri, and send him into deep ontological doubt, his relationship to women is marked by the relief that “pussy’s the same in every color” (178). Piri is wounded by racism and torn in his attempts to construct a stable racial/national identity; unfortunately, he uses women’s bodies to unleash his hatred of whites. On several occasions he uses sex as a weapon “in anger, in hate” against white women (90). In a chapter entitled “Barroom Sociology,” Piri, his African-American friend Brew, and a bartender of mixed racial heritage, spend the evening talking about biological and social constructions of race in the United States. At the end of the evening’s philosophical discussion, Brew suggests that they “go see what pussy’s sellin’ fo’ by the pound” (178). It is here that Piri makes the comment about women’s genitals as offering the great “color” equalizer, revealing the sexist attitudes towards women that are consistent throughout the novel. Part of Piri’s attitudes towards women, in particular his misogynistic attitudes towards white women, are bound up with his experiences of racism from dominant culture, as well as internalized racism and self-hatred compounded by his location within his family, as the “dark one” that his father loves least. Rejected by his father, it is only the streets of Spanish Harlem, with his boys, that provide Piri with a sense of “home,” even when he is strung out on heroin and literally home-less, crashing with whomever he can.

What does “home” mean for diasporic populations? How is “home” tied to national loyalties? Where do Puerto Ricans fit within the concept of diaspora, a notion that challenges “our received notions of place, disrupting those normative spatial temporal units of analysis like nation and culture?”⁴⁶ Certainly the Puerto Rican literature written in the United States reflects diaspora experienced as “the doubled relationship or dual loyalty that migrants exiles, and refugees have to places – their connections to the space they currently occupy and their continuing involvement with ‘back home.’”⁴⁷ Yet, Puerto Ricans in the U.S. are neither political refugees of war, nor are they barred return

to their home country. The close proximity of Puerto Rico to the United States and the “open borders” continue to facilitate Puerto Rican migration to the United States.

In a special issue of *Callaloo* devoted to Puerto Rican literature and culture, Martin Espada and Juan Flores argue that “the Puerto Rican experience is part of the African Diaspora,”⁴⁸ intimately tied to economic and political intervention on the island and a history of slavery⁴⁹ and colonial oppression, from the Spanish colonization in 1508 to the transfer of colonial rule to the United States in 1898. Juan Flores has argued that “because Puerto Rico remains in direct colonial bondage to the United States, Puerto Rican cultural expression in the United States must continually evoke the relation, above all, between Puerto Rican people here and there, between the expressive life of the migrant population and... the Island culture,”⁵⁰ echoing Aparicio’s claim that Puerto Rican literature necessarily examines “these colonial strategies as they affect the Puerto Rican community, strategies which have changed historically and which have led to neo-colonial forms of social dynamics” in the U.S. and on the island.⁵¹

As I have shown in this chapter, for Piri Thomas, the effects of colonialism on his own Puerto Rican cultural and national identity are most clearly evidenced by his conflicted relationship with his father, his misogynistic and violent behavior toward white women, and, significantly, his finding a sense of belonging with his gang, a sense of pride from successful battles against other gangs, “enemies from other countries”, and loyalty to his home turf, his territory, the only “Puerto Rican Paradise” available to him, the mean streets. Even upon his return from serving a seven-year jail sentence, Piri chooses Harlem over suburbia, where the rest of his family has settled, despite the fact that, as an ex-junkie and an ex-con, the streets of the inner-city hold more danger and temptation. Homi Bhabha explains that it is to the city that the migrant, the minority, and the diasporic “come to change the history of the nation,”⁵² redrawing its frontiers “in the menacing, agonistic boundary of cultural difference that never quite adds up, always less than one nation and double.”⁵³ For Piri, Spanish Harlem is the only home he has ever known, one where he can exist, his identity split, like that of the nation itself. Toward the end of his memoir, Piri writes, “I still can’t help but feeling both paddy and Negro... I’m scared of this hate with one name that’s chewing me up” (180). He is split between two racial identities, and his choice, like his father’s before him, has ramifications on his status as citizen.

In his later work Thomas has continued to struggle with his relationship to dominant culture, despite his rejection of gang life, raising the possibility that as long as racism, class oppression, and U.S. imperialism continue, a stable home will continue to be an illusive place. In a speech entitled “A Bicentennial Without a Puerto Rican Colony,” published nine years after the first printing of *Down These Mean Streets*, Thomas calls for the liberation of the island from imperial influence, saying, “The United States revolution of 1776 loses validity in light of Puerto Rico’s colonial situation under the Stars and Stripes. The plight of the Puerto Rican people is similar to that of the Euro-American settlers under the thumb-screw of British imperialism.”⁵⁵ He radicalizes many of his youthful notions (expressed in *Down These Mean Streets*) and revises the sense of “home” and community felt on the streets with his gang to a fervent cultural nationalism, that in rhetoric at least, condemns and

denounces imperialistic U.S. policies, past and present, and offers a powerful critique of the dominant culture’s construction of the American national symbolic. For Thomas, a “free” Puerto Rico is tied to freedom for all who have been and continue to be colonized:

*Puerto Rico will be free; the nations of Native Americans will be free; Africa, Asia, and Latin America, all will be free! And until that day, until that glorious moment, the United States Empire, standing as the principal obstacle in the way of freedom for all, has no right to celebrate a Bicentennial while it holds colonies and oppresses people anywhere in the world. Que Viva Puerto Rico libre y unido entre un mundo libre y unido!*⁵⁶

Endnotes

1. The first part of my title is inspired by an article by Celina Romany, *Neither Here nor There... Yet, Callaloo*. 15.4 (1992): 1034.
2. *Down These Mean Streets*, (New York: Knopf, 1967). Hereafter, I will cite this in the text parenthetically.
3. Juan Flores, *Divided Borders: Essays on Puerto Rican Identity*. (Houston: Arte Público, 1993), 143.
4. In 1493 Christopher Columbus visited Boriquen, renaming it San Juan Bautista. Juan Ponce de Leon, who established a settlement on the island in 1508, renamed it Puerto Rico (Rich Port).
5. Maria Teresa Babín, ed., *Borinquen: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Literature*. (New York: Vintage, 1974).
6. Babin, xii.
7. Flores, *Divided Borders*, 134.
8. Roberto Santiago, ed., *Boricuas: Influential Puerto Rican Writings – An Anthology*. (New York: Ballantine, 1995) xiii.
9. Miguel Algarín and Miguel Piñero, eds. *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings*. (New York: William Morrow, 1975).
10. Frances Aparicio, “From Ethnicity to Multiculturalism: An Historical Overview of Puerto Rican Literature in the United States,” *Handbook of Hispanic Cultures*, ed. Francisco Lomeli. (Houston: Arte Público, 1993) 26.
11. Aparicio, 26.
12. Algarín, 15.
13. Aparicio, 26.
14. Dorriane Kondo, “The Narrative Production of ‘Home,’ Community, and Political Identity in Asian American Theater,” *Displacement, Diaspora and Geographies of Identity*, eds. Smakar Lavie and Ted Swedenburg. (Durham: Duke, 1996) 97.
15. Edna Acosta-Belén, “Beyond Island Boundaries: Ethnicity, Gender, and Cultural Revitalization in Nuyorican Literature,” *Callaloo*. 15.4 (1992): 984.

- 16 Many Puerto Ricans have attempted to resist assimilation by retaining and continuing to celebrate certain island traditions, an excellent example being the urban “casitas,” architectural wonders reflecting island culture that have sprung up in the South Bronx and Esas Harlem. These small houses are “magically evocative of the rural Caribbean and now serve as a social club or cultural center for inhabitants of the surrounding tenement” (Juan Flores, “Salvación Casita”: Puerto Rican Performance and Vernacular Architecture in the South Bronx,” *Negotiating performance: Gender, Sexuality, and Theatricality in Latin/ o America*, eds. Diana Taylor and Juan Villegas. (Durham: Duke, 1994) 121.)
- 17 Kondo, 97.
- 18 Judith Freidenberg. “Introduction.” *The Anthropology of Lower Income Urban Enclaves: The Case of East Harlem*, ed. Judith Freidenberg. vol. 749. (New York: The New York Academy of Sciences, 1995) 3.
19. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*. (London: Verso, 1983) 13.
20. Lauren Berlant, *The Anatomy of a National Fantasy*. (Chicago: U of Chicago, 1991) 20.
21. Berlant, 225.
22. Freidenberg, 3.
23. See Leonard D. Eron, Jacquelyn H. Gentry, and Peggy Schlegel, eds., *Reason to Hope: A Psychosocial Perspective on Violence and Youth* (Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association, 1994) and Judith Freidenberg. “Introduction.” *The Anthropology of Lower Income Urban Enclaves: The Case of East Harlem*, vol. 749, ed. Judith Freidenberg. (New York: The New York Academy of Sciences, 1995).
24. Berlant, 9.
25. Flores, *Divided Borders* 140.
26. Flores, *Divided Borders* 140.
27. Flores, *Divided Borders* 141.
28. Edna Acosta-Belen, “Beyond Island Boundaries: Ethnicity, Gender, and Cultural Revitalization in Nuyorican Literature,” *Callaloo*. 15.4 (1992): 995.
29. Aparicio, 21.
30. Piri Thomas, “A Bicentennial without a Puerto Rican Colony,” *The Crisis*, vol. 82, no. 10 (1975): 407-410.
31. Thomas, *The Crisis*, 407.
32. Thomas, *The Crisis*, 410.
33. Thomas, *The Crisis*, 406.
34. Flores, *Divided Borders*, 111.
35. Flores, *Divided Borders*, 152.
36. The school board of Queens School District 25 moved to ban *Down These Mean Streets* from junior high school libraries “on the basis of ‘obscene language’ and ‘explicit descriptions of homosexual and heterosexual acts,’” quoted in “Piri Thomas” by Yanis Gordils in *Biographical dictionary of Hispanic Literature in the United States: The Literature of Puerto Ricans, Cuban Americans, and other Hispanic Writers*. Edited by Nicolas Kanellos. Westport: Greenwood, 1989.
37. Santiago, xvii.
38. Thomas, *The Crisis* 410.
39. Thomas, *The Crisis* 410.
40. Clara E. Rodriguez, “Puerto Ricans: Between Black and White,” *Boricuas: Influential Puerto Rican Writings*, ed. Roberto Santiago. (New York: Ballantine 1995) 26.
41. Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991) 12.
42. Eugene V. Mohr, *The Nuyorican Experience: Literature of the Puerto Rican Minority*, (Westport: Greenwood, 1982) 45.
43. Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedenbury, ed., *Displacement, Diaspora, and Geographies of Identity*, (Durham: Duke UP, 1996) 1.
44. Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedenburg, 1.
45. Thomas, *The Crisis*, 409.

- 46 Mary G. Harris, *Cholas: Latino Girls and Gangs*, (New York: AMS Press, 1988) 17. Houston: Arte Público, 1974.
- 47 Felix Padilla, *The Gang as an American Enterprise* (New Jersey: Rutgers, 1993) 2.
- 48 Berlant, 12.
- 49 *The Location of Culture*, 164.
- 50 Bhabha, 170.
- 51 Bhabha, 168.
52. Thomas' autobiographical trilogy continues with *Saviour*, *Saviour, Hold my Hand*, (1972) and *Seven Long Times*, (1974), each mentioned briefly in the previous section.
- 53 Smadar and Swedenburg, 14.
- 54 Smadar and Swedenburg, 14.
- 55 "Introduction," by Marin Espinada and Juan Flores, eds., *Callaloo*, 15.4 (1992) 941.
- 56 In 1503, The Crown of Castille authorized the import of black slaves to the new world. By 1765, there were approximately 5,037 slaves in an island population of 44,833. It was not until 1848 that the slave trade ended when Spain gave in to British pressure. In 1873 Slavery was abolished in Puerto Rico. From *The Puerto Ricans: Their History, Culture, and Society*, ed. Adalberto Lopez. (Cambridge: Schenkman, 1980) 476-482.
57. This mass migration to the U.S. did not begin until well after the U.S. took possession of Puerto Rico. In "The Puerto Rican Diaspora," historian Adalberto Lopez argues that "It was the chronic lack of employment on the island on one hand and the demand on the mainland for cheap unskilled or semi-skilled labor in the competitive industries (such as the garment industry) and the 'service' sector (janitors, dishwashers, hotel maids, bus-boys, etc.) on the other that accounted primarily for the beginning of a massive migration of Puerto Ricans to the continental United States in the 1940s" *The Puerto Ricans: Their History, Culture, and Society*, ed. Adalberto Lopez, [Cambridge: Schenkman, 1980] 317. In addition, Puerto Rico was of particular importance to the United States in part because of its strategic location in the Caribbean and the wealth of cheap labor it provided.
- 58 Aparicio, 36.
- 59 Flores, *Divided Borders*, 14.
- 60 Aparicio, 36.
61. See Oscar Lewis, *La Vida*, New York: Random House, 1965); Bernardo Vega, *Memoirs of Bernardo Vega* ed., Cesar Andreu Iglesias and trans. Juan Flores (New York: Monthly Review, 1984).