

The Antifoundational Foundational Fiction of Piri Thomas (1928–2011)¹

ARNALDO CRUZ-MALAVÉ

ABSTRACT

Is Piri Thomas a foundational author? Does he inaugurate, as proposed by some critics and readers, a new harmoniously rehabilitated and unfractured diasporic U.S. Puerto Rican and Latino ethnic subject? Or is the thrust of his work an audacious and unrelenting unveiling—not resolving—of the entangled territory of trauma of a racialized colonial corporal history that keeps haunting the Puerto Rican/Latino family and culture? The present essay argues for the latter reading while maintaining that these important questions are especially worth asking now that, with Thomas's recent passing, we turn to his texts in search of his legacy—and our inheritance. [Key words: Nuyorican Literature, Latino Literature, Foundations, Colonialism, Racial Melancholy, Mourning]

The author (cruzmalave@fordham.edu) is Professor of Spanish and Comparative Literature at Fordham University. He is the author of *Queer Latino Testimonio*, *Keith Haring*, and *Juanito Xtravaganza: Hard Tails* (Palgrave, 2007) and of *El primitivo implorante* (Rodopi, 1994), and coeditor, with Martin Manalansan, of *Queer Globalization: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism* (NYU Press, 2002). His essays have appeared in anthologies such as *Entiendes? Queer Readings/Hispanic Writings* (Duke, 1995), *Sex and Sexuality in Latin America* (NYU Press, 1997), and *Queer Representations* (NYU Press, 1997), and in journals such as *Revista Iberoamericana*, *differences*, *Revista de Crítica Cultural*, *Cuban Studies*, and *CENTRO Journal*.

*"I am 'My Majesty Piri Thomas,' with a high on anything and
like a stoned king, I gotta survey my kingdom.
I'm a skinny, dark-face, curly-haired, intense Porty-Reecan—
Unsatisfied, hoping, and always reaching."*

—PIRI THOMAS, *DOWN THESE MEAN STREETS* (1968)

SOMEWHERE TOWARD THE BEGINNING OF THE MUCH-DEFERRED BEGINNING OF HIS CLASSIC BEGINNINGS: INTENTION AND METHOD, THE POSTCOLONIAL CULTURAL CRITIC EDWARD SAID MAKES THE RATHER OBVIOUS POINT THAT BEGINNINGS ARE ALWAYS RETROSPECTIVE INVENTIONS (1975: 29). Authors who are later considered to have founded a genre, a literary movement or even a tradition often fail to notice what they are the beginning of; they often miss that nebulously liminal instance in which their beginning intention turns into something else—the cause or origin of some other creative effort or force. Beginnings, Said would elaborate, are useful fictions, often mobilized, as Nietzsche would contend, in the interest of some other utility or end which the author of the original work had not foreseen (Said 1975: 174–5). The cause or origin of a discourse or book and the utility or end to which it will later be put, he would propose, are radically different events, if not altogether “opposed to each other,” as Nietzsche had claimed (Nietzsche 1954: 692), separated in time and space and mediated by the power relations inherent in any act of creative intentionality or interpretative force.

“*Uno nunca sabe para quién trabaja,*” could have been Piri Thomas’s rapid-fire, barrio-inflected, colloquially bilingual, succinct, Spanish-English reply to Said’s musings on the power relations inherent in all postulated beginnings. He had grown in the imposed, spectacularly visible obscurity of the “garbage-lepered streets” of East Harlem/El Barrio, as he would claim (Thomas 1967: 9), but would live to see his first autobiographical novel, *Down These Mean Streets* (1967), declared by none other than *The New York Times* as one of the all-time “10 Best Books About New York City,” in short, a modern American “classic.” He had grown up a “loner,” a ruminating, self-reflexive “introverted extrovert,” as he would clarify in the 2004 documentary on his life and work, *Every Child Is Born a Poet*, feeling ostracized by his family as “*el negrito de la familia,*” as the very incarnation of an unacknowledged, disavowed, unspoken

family shame, but would live to become the predecessor of all New York Puerto Rican or Nuyorican writing and perhaps—to judge from how many contemporary books on Latino writing begin with a meditation on *Down These Mean Streets*—one of the founding figures of U.S. Latino literature.²

And yet like so many parents, like the parents of the protagonist of his own novel included, Thomas, one might say, would fail to recognize himself in his progeny or fail to fully identify with the role that this progeny had assigned to him. And though he would always insistently claim to be representing “[his] people,” to be telling their story “like it is” (“I was not only writing about Piri Thomas ... I was also writing about my people [in *Down These Mean Streets*] ... [telling] it like it is—*nada más ni nada menos*,” he would affirm to Hugh Downs, the host of the *Today* TV show, in 1967), he would never embrace a “minority” identity (Hernández 1997: 176), would never give up on the dream of attaining an ever-deferred universality while situating himself valiantly and defiantly in a periphery that was not merely strategic but ethical. Instead of assuming the hierarchical role of modeling predecessor spokesman, Thomas would humbly, even deferentially, prefer the horizontal language of contiguities and *compañerismo*, the ever-rubbing-against-the-grain of dialogue and potential solidarity, asserting, against the demand of publishers, that New York Puerto Rican authors needed not write like him, needed not conform to a “behavior-modify[ing]” marketing system that insisted on reproducing the same tale, that there were “a million stories in the barrios, if not more” (Hernández 1997: 182–3). No matter, for we—the artists and critics of U.S. Puerto Rican, Nuyorican and Latino literatures—would repeatedly claim him affectionately, passionately, boisterously, with a fervor that entailed an obligation, that demanded an identificatory stance, that must have surely been for him as intoxicatingly seductive as it was suffocating or stifling.

Borges, one of Latin American literature’s postmodern founding figures, has famously stated that all writers “create” their precursors (Borges 1989: 90), obliquely elevating thus the secondariness and belatedness felt by modern Latin American authors vis-à-vis the European and Western tradition into a virtue and a freedom to innovate and turning all claims of direct genealogical descent into a deficit or, in his words, a “superstition”: Like the Jews, who “act within [Western] culture yet feel no particularly devoted attachment to it,” he would propose, “we Argentineans, South Americans in general, ... can handle all European topics, handle them without superstitions, with an irreverence that can have, and has already had, fortunate consequences” (Borges 1989: 272–3).³ But what about the predecessor’s—rather than the successor’s or heir’s—freedom to act and innovate? Could we also speak of a freedom that is the province of the predecessor’s tenuous, tentative texts, made of



Piri Thomas. From the Elba Cabrera Papers. Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora. Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY. Reprinted by permission.

polyvalent unsettledness and unyielding search, of pugnacious, dialogic struggles and faith, before our claims of beginning intention, our hungry, needy affection or love seek to identify and overwhelm that nebulously liminal point inhabited by them, dispelling it, clarifying it, fixing it and fixating on it until it condenses into the solidity of stones—the stones of commemorations and honors, to be sure, but also of memorials and death? It is a question worth asking now that, with Thomas’s recent passing, we turn to his texts in search of our inheritance, our image, our filiation.

Piri Thomas—the writer whose literary persona desperately seeks a father with whom to identify, a father with enough social authority to become his racial/ethnic role model and can never find one—has paradoxically become for us, critics of Puerto Rican and Latino literature, the father, or better yet, the grandfather, the ancestor or *mero mero*, as our Mexican and Mexican-American colleagues would say, from whose lineage we descend and in whose name we assert our right to belong to and speak for the Puerto Rican and Latino diasporic communities in the U.S., and especially New York, as “home,” as an alternative home.

From the poetic prologue of *Down These Mean Streets*, where the protagonist stands on the rooftop of his “broken-down building at night” to “survey [his] kingdom” and claim his “*barrio de noche*,” his turf (Thomas 1968: 9–10), to the novel’s last scene where he descends from this same rooftop to its “mutilated,” “mean streets” (Thomas 1968: 298),

East Harlem/El Barrio is not just the setting or backdrop to Thomas's autobiographical novel; it is his novel's other main character, its alter-ego, the protagonist's other, parallel self. And its story traces not just the formation or *bildungs* of a socially marginalized character in search of recognition and respect; it also documents the development of this community from its depression-era tenement life through its mambo-inflected streets during the great, post-World-War-II, Puerto Rican migration to New York (significantly represented here by the protagonist's main love interest, Trina, who is appropriately nicknamed "Marine Tiger" after the ship that brought so many Puerto Ricans to the city during these years) to the "mutilated" landscape of public housing or "projects" of the urban renewal policies of the 1950s: "My Harlem," Piri will exclaim in the end, had been changing. Like him, it "had a somewhat different face" (Thomas 1968: 298). "Big brick housing projects were all over the place, big alien intruders. They had been mutilating my turf..." (Thomas 1968: 298). "[B]ut the heart," he will come to realize and confirm, "was still there" (1968: 298). In a novel about communion and longing, about the yearning for romance and the weaning oneself off the mirage of it as if it were a bad habit or a drug, El Barrio, one might say, is the only true romance—the one that lasts to the end, and the one its story offers us in lieu of the deceptive, or even fatal, compensations of machismo, heterosexual union, family belonging, or a stable racial identity: "Hey, Piri, you making it?," asks the junkie Carlito in the novel's final take. "Yeah!," Piri yells back at him as he descends from the rooftop and walks out to embrace the crowded streets while an "unseen jukebox beat[s] out a sad-assed bolero" (1968: 314).

"Hey, Piri, you making it?," asks the junkie Carlito in the novel's final take. "Yeah!," Piri yells back at him as he descends from the rooftop and walks out to embrace the crowded streets while an "unseen jukebox beat[s] out a sad-assed bolero"

Ever since the novel first appeared critics have been wondering about the meaning of this final narrative gesture. Is Piri leaving behind here the deceptive, mutilating or "clipping" world of the streets, as he would call it (Thomas 1968: 65), for the promise of a more authentic world of redemption and personal and communal integration and wholeness? Is he attempting, as he would later claim in the documentary based on his life and works, *Every Child Is Born a Poet* (2003), to lift himself or "rise above those mean streets" as a sign of salvation, rehabilitation, and incorporation into the greater society? The final image that Thomas's book offers us, however, would not seem to suggest so; it is not one of transcendence but of immersion—not one of redemption

and communal integration but of mournful descent from the deceptive certitudes of ethno-national romantic unity, gender posturing and race and embrace of the streets as an unknown, yet-undefined world. Like the gaze postulated by Michel de Certeau in his *Practice of Everyday Life* (1984),⁴ Piri's, one might say, would seem to rise to the privileged vantage point offered by the rooftop view of El Barrio "*de noche*" in his novel's poetic prologue, where "gone [are] the drabness and hurt" of El Barrio's "garbage-lepered streets" "covered" and cleansed by a "friendly night," a "warm *amigo* darkness" (Thomas 1968: 9–10), only to descend in the end to the contingency and precariousness of the crowded, mournfully "clipping" streets. As it is already prefigured in this prologue, Piri will attempt to rise as "[His] Majesty Piri Thomas," as a "stoned king," in order to take stock of and "survey" *his* barrio, *his* home, *his* turf, only to find, instead of a sovereign "kingdom," the already socially implicated and entangled territory of his vulnerable and alienated, dark "Porty-Reecan" body as his sole inheritance, his only estranged "alien turf":

**I am "My Majesty Piri Thomas," with a high on anything and
like a stoned king, I gotta survey my kingdom.
I'm a skinny, dark-face, curly-haired, intense Porty-Ree-can
—Unsatisfied, hoping, and always reaching. (Thomas 1968: 10)**

Piri Thomas's romance with the streets of El Barrio, his refusal to follow on his family's conventional white immigrant footsteps to the suburbs in the hopes of attaining a homogenizing, universalizing sense of American-ness, his stubbornly loving claim to El Barrio as he "comes to voice" and becomes representative of it, it is true, is a compellingly modeling story—one that should incite us as readers, critics and artists to return to the presumed certitude of what Thomas had chosen in the original manuscript of *Down These Mean Streets* as his novel's title, "Home Sweet Harlem" (Hernández 1997: 177), in order to close ranks around it and to speak for it. And yet while this modeling story, addressed especially to its U.S. Puerto Rican and Latino audiences, continues to be the novel's politically inflected, compellingly deictic command, what remains most striking to me today in Thomas's *Down These Mean Streets*, and even in his admittedly less complex subsequent work, such as *Savior, Savior, Hold My Hand* (1972), is not this politics of representation, which his works consistently complicate, but, as the quote above shows, its audacious and unrelenting unveiling—not resolving—of that other entangled territory of trauma of a racialized colonial corporal history that keeps haunting the Puerto Rican family and its members' choices, both public and private.⁵

The story of this other racial colonial corporal history and of its disavowal, what Lyn di Iorio Sandín has astutely analyzed, following David Eng's, Shinhee Han's and Judith Butler's elaborations on Freud's psychic distinction between mourning and melancholia, as Thomas's family's "racial melancholia" (di Iorio Sandín 2004: 103–16), which Piri both performs and incarnates, is significantly inscribed not on the streets but elsewhere, obscenely, spectacularly offsite, offstage. I'm referring to that other location of Piri's deep, heart-felt meditations and anagnorises or, as the narrator calls them, his "reveries," in *Down These Mean Streets*, where the novel's main gender and racial conflicts are explored and taken to their limit, brought, so to speak, to a head, impacting the novel's plot's subsequent development, climax and dénouement. I'm referring to the bathroom.

Risking descent into the eschatological, risking what my mother would call a peculiarly Puerto Rican propensity ("¿Por qué será que nosotros siempre terminamos hablando de...?") I dare ask: have you ever noticed how often the bathroom appears in this novel—to the point of constituting the novel's other parallel story, its palimpsestic counterpoint to the "mean streets"?

Risking descent into the eschatological, risking what my mother would call a peculiarly Puerto Rican propensity ("¿Por qué será que nosotros siempre terminamos hablando de...?") I dare ask: have you ever noticed how often the bathroom appears in this novel—to the point of constituting the novel's other parallel story, its palimpsestic counterpoint to the "mean streets"? More than ten years ago I noted how in much U.S. Puerto Rican or Nuyorican writing, in texts like Pedro Pietri's *The Masses Are Asses* or Miguel Piñero's "Paper Toilet" and *Short Eyes*, the bathroom, or toilet, in its multiple incarnations or avatars as public restroom or private, domestic space, functions obsessively as a key metaphor or trope for the banishment and expulsion of Puerto Rican male subjects from the hegemonic discourses of masculinity and national identification.⁶ A border of sorts where the public and private distinctions, what's socially acceptable and assimilable and what's not, and the gender, sexual, and racial hierarchies associated with them come together, clash and blur, the bathroom is also, as Lee Edelman proposed (1994: 160–2), riffing on Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, at the height of queer studies in 1994, the place where anxieties about these distinctions are managed, worked out, and purged.

The bathroom—that space where the body that is hidden, incorporated *and* disavowed, or "introjected," as Freud had proposed about the fate of lost melancholy

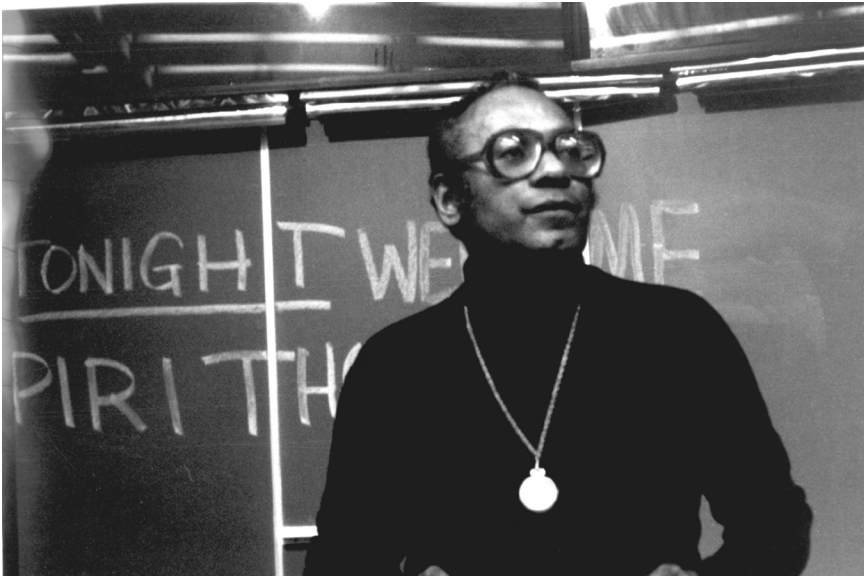


From the Elba Cabrera Papers. Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora. Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY. Reprinted by permission.

objects (Freud 1989: 586), into the family's secret, repressed colonial history, is unveiled—makes its appearance early on in Thomas's novel innocently enough, playfully and even banally tied to quotidian, everyday questions of hygiene, as they are associated especially with race. Resorting to that familial Puerto Rican practice of deploying the diminutive to palliate or soften the blow of impacting, socially injurious categories of speech, the mother admonishes Piri, her "*negrito*," who has come up from the street sweaty from playing stick ball, to bathe before eating dinner. "*Vete! Vete!* Get away from that food with your dirty hands," she orders, and adds: "*Dios mío*, you smell bad, all full of sweat...." "Gimme a kiss, Moms; come on, *vente*—a big *jalumbo* kiss," Piri offers conciliatorily, only to be rebuffed: "Get away, you smell

bad, all full of sweat. Go, get in that bathtub and let the water and soap make you soft so the dirt has a chance to come off." "Aw, Moms, you love me any way I am, clean or dirty, white or black, pretty or ugly," he retorts. "*Sí*, you're right," she avers, "and my son, I have to love you because only your mother could love you, *un negrito* and ugly. And to make it badder, you're dirty and smelly from your sweat!" (Thomas 1968: 29).

Soaking on the tub as his mother orders, the next scene finds the young protagonist, John Peter Thomas, named after his father but nicknamed Peter, Petey, or in his mother's Hispanicized English, *Pirí*, surveying his exposed, "skinny" black body while absent-mindedly playing with his flaccid, "floating" "pee pee" or "peter," which is "empty" like a "toy balloon" (1968: 32), and wondering why he cannot see himself reflected in his father's image, why his father, whom he decidedly "favors," whom he racially or



From the Elba Cabrera Papers. Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora. Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY. Reprinted by permission.

phenotypically looks like, refuses to acknowledge him. This will be the first of a series of meditations or, as the text calls them, bathroom “reveries” in which the protagonist’s inability to find his image in the paternal gaze, to accede psychoanalytically, as it were, to *being* more than a flaccid or vulnerable “peter” or Piri, to *having*—as opposed to *being*—the Lacanian signifier for paternal recognition or phallus, will intersect with a discourse about race, a repressed colonial history, and shame that structures Piri’s relationship with his melancholy, disavowing Puerto Rican-Cuban family.⁷

From this moment on the trope of the bathroom will haunt the novel’s narrative, inflecting especially its discussions of race. It will configure blackness, in many of Piri’s most tormented conversations on identity and race with his interlocutors and sometimes adversaries, the Southern African-Americans Crutch and Brew, the novel’s other main spokesmen for black identity and nationalism as a base-line, radically impermeable condition of abjection and banishment in which, as Crutch categorically states, “a drop of Negro blood can make a black man out of a pink-asshole, blue-eyed white man” (Thomas 1968: 122). And it will signal an entangled and complicated, shameful history not merely of racial and colonial oppression but of submission and complicity as the particularly defining mark of the African-American experience. “But Brew... you don’t have to be from the South to know what’s happenin’,” Piri will counter. “There’s toilet bowls wherever you go...” (1968:

127). Yet Brew, who will later reveal his attempted rape and sodomy by a white Southerner when he was a child, will insist: No, he will claim, it's worse "down thar," more painful—and by extension more "real," more defining of the black experience—because "down thar ... if one ain't real careful, he can grow up smilin' his ass off and showin' pearly whites till his gums catch pneumonia" (Thomas 1968: 127), because "down thar ... if one ain't real careful," the white man's domination can easily turn into complicity and compliance: "My daddy used to say," he will conclude as if unloading a painfully repressed memory, "that 'The Indian fought the white man and died / An' us black folk jus' wagged ouah tails'" (Thomas 1968: 128).

It is this other repressed colonial history of complicity and submission, which is configured in *Down These Mean Streets* with metaphors of abjection and sodomy and inscribed in the trope of the bathroom or toilet, that will erupt toward the middle of the novel, spilling over as it were from the offstage space of introjection and banishment that is the bathroom onto the family's other public space of sociability, the living room or *sala*, as Allan Isaac has astutely noted in his comparative racial analysis of *Down These Mean Streets* (Isaac 2006: 140–1), in what is to my mind the climax of the novel and one of the most stunningly unexpected moments in all Puerto Rican and perhaps U.S. Latino literature. So stunningly unexpected is this moment that most readers have failed to remark on its oddity and daring, that most have failed to note that, while the streets are the space where ethnic and racial conflict is ostensibly enacted and performed, it is here in this other offstage, palimpsestic, contrapuntal site where the family's repressed colonial history is being negotiated and worked out and a quasi-biblical fratricidal climax is being prepared which will erupt placing the disavowed black naked body in the house's most visibly public room amid tears, blood, and urine.

As in his first bathroom reverie, Piri had been bathing before dinner when his light-skinned, "white" brother José "splinters" his daydreaming by "kicking at the door in sheer panic" and barging in to pee (Thomas 1968: 142). Unable to reach the toilet in time because of Piri's delay in opening the door, or so he thinks, José will soil his pants and grab Piri's towel to clean himself off, handing it back to him. Forced to use this single soiled towel, sharing it, Piri will proceed to declare then for the first time in the text to his brother and to himself "I'm a Negro," adding, "[and of course] if I'm a Negro, then you and James ... and Sis and Poppa" are Negroes too" (1968: 143). Looking at the toilet bowl and trying to wipe the spill of urine off his pants that he thinks was caused by Piri's delay to open the door, José will forcefully and angrily respond: "I ain't no nigger!," and attempt to walk out. "You can be [one] if you want to be," he will insist. "You can go down South and grow cotton, or pick it, or whatever the fuck they do ... You can bow and kiss ass and clean shit bowls. But—I—am—white!" (Thomas 1968:

145). Yet feeling backed into a corner by Piri's persistent argument that, as far as the U.S. racial power structure is concerned, as far as "Mr. Charlie," any drop of black blood taints, any drop of black blood colors or makes one black (Thomas 1968: 144), literally unable to leave the bathroom or to cleanse himself off the stain of urine, José, who will continue to refuse to identify as "Negro," claiming that he is "white" and his father "Indian" (Thomas 1968: 145), will finally lash out at Piri, inadvertently revealing the family's deeply held sense of shame which had been projected onto him: "I don't know how you come to be my brother," he will haltingly confess, "but I love you *like* one. [And] I've busted my ass, both me and James, trying to explain to people how come you so dark ... how come your hair is so curly..." (Thomas 1968: 146—emphasis added). And then all of a sudden as if he were "creep[ing] up a long sinking shit-hole agony," the text reads (1968: 146), Piri will emerge out of his family's paralyzing sense of shame, out of the disavowed space of introjection and banishment that is the bathroom in this novel, and lunge furiously at his brother punching him out and crashing into the public, social space of the living room in one single mass of hurt, blood, naked black flesh, and urine while the father, horrified at this quasi-biblical "Cain and Abel scene" (Thomas 1968: 147), attempts to restrain him and his mother cries softly wondering "Why does it hurt you so to be *un Negrito*?" (1968: 148).

"Why does it hurt you so to be un Negrito?"

A moment of high melodrama unlike no other in all of Puerto Rican fiction, this scene however will produce no family reconciliation or union. Instead, silence and a sense of paralyzing shame will overtake the family in its refusal to give up what Piri will call at the end of the scene the fantasy or "lying dream" of "white status" (Thomas 1968: 150), preserved by the family through its incorporation *and* disavowal of blackness and the colonial racial history associated with it. True enough, the father will finally open up to Piri and confess that his father's obsequiousness toward American whiteness, which accounts for his and his son's "fine American names," John Peter Thomas, had made him feel like a "*puta*," a "damn nothing" (Thomas 1968: 153), resorting thus to metaphors of sodomy and gender dysfunction to obliquely configure a repressed racialized colonial history.⁸ But this admission will not lead, as it does in mourning, to an acknowledgment and eventual acceptance of loss. On the contrary, as the scene closes the father will fall silent and turn inwardly, in a manner reminiscent of that which Freud identified with melancholic disavowal, whereby the subject

withdraws its libidinal attachment from the lost love object to the ego, substituting the ego for the lost object and confusing the loss of the object with the loss of itself (Freud 1989: 586): “Poppa didn’t answer,” Piri will observe (Thomas 1968: 153). “He was way back when he was young and running into his own kinds of wall” (1968: 153), looking for himself among the ruins, caught up or frozen in some other inarticulable moment in time. Indeed, as the scene ends and Piri gets ready to leave for the South to find out and face “what a *moyeto*’s [or black man’s] worth [is] and the paddy’s weight on him” (1968: 143), he will characterize his family’s reaction to this scene as a funeral, a “Puerto Rican funeral for a baby” to be precise (1968: 148), a *baquiné*, where, as in Francisco Oller’s 1893 iconic depiction in his classic painting *El Velorio* [The Wake], an image that haunts all of Puerto Rican literature and culture to this day,⁹ there is a wake but no mourning, a corpse but no loss. Instead of mourning, as proposed by Rubén Ríos Ávila in his analysis of subjectivity and trauma in Puerto Rican culture, the infant, who is neatly placed in the painting on a delicately dressed dining room table at a suggestive angle from the depiction of a traditionally roasted pig on a spit, is the object of a monstrous, grotesque incorporation—a melancholic introjection, we would add—on the part of his community (Ríos Ávila 2002: 57). “It was like a Puerto Rican funeral for a baby,” Piri will conclude before leaving, where he was charged with incarnating the dead child while “everybody [else] play[ed] games like pinning twisted paper tails on people and setting fire to them, then making a roar of soundless laughter and drinking coffee and eating *tocino* sandwiches” (Thomas 1968: 148).

Down These Mean Streets is more a work of mourning than of foundation, more an acknowledgment of and a coming to terms with loss than the discovery and promotion of a new, alternative identitarian wholeness.

It has been said that *Down These Mean Streets* is a foundational text, that it inaugurates, as evinced in the critiques of its early reviewers and readers, a new harmoniously rehabilitated and unfractured diasporic U.S. Puerto Rican and Latino ethnic subject (Viego 2007: 9). But as the above scene confirms, *Down These Mean Streets* is more a work of mourning than of foundation, more an acknowledgment of and a coming to terms with loss than the discovery and promotion of a new, alternative identitarian wholeness. At the end of the novel, as the protagonist looks at himself in the bathroom mirror yet again, he feels not as though he were affirming a stable new identity but as though he “had found a hole in his face and out of it were pouring all the different masks that [his

dead-pan] *cara-palo* face had fought so hard to keep hidden” (Thomas 1968: 306). Instead of an affirmation of a new Latino subjectivity, we could say, *Down These Mean Streets* is a farewell, or better yet, a beginning that is also a farewell. What an awesome and unexpectedly auspicious beginning for a new diasporic literature we might also propose then the works of founder Piri Thomas would seem to inaugurate—an antifoundational foundation, a foundation that is also a farewell, where the illusions of certainty that had sustained an emerging ethnic subject (macho performance, heterosexual ethno-national union, family belonging, and even race) dissolve as he opens up and surrenders to the multiple possibilities of a yet-undefined terrain.



Immortal Piri by Miguel Trelles [Photoshop assist: Jonás Hidalgo]
(Size: 22" x 30"; Medium: ink, collage, Photoshop). Reprinted by permission.

NOTES

¹ I borrow the term “antifoundational foundational” from Urayoán Noel’s (2008) innovative analysis of New York Puerto Rican or Nuyorican literary production as an expression of the city’s avant-garde. His use derives from the felicitous conjunction of Israel Reyes’s (2005) insights on humor in Puerto Rican literature and Rubén Ríos Ávila’s meditations on subjectivity and trauma in Puerto Rican culture in his brilliant *La raza cómica* (2002).

² The following recent studies on Latino identity as expressed in literature are propelled by meditations on Piri Thomas’s *Down These Mean Streets* as a foundational text of Latino studies and identity: Viego (2007); Caminero-Santangelo (2007); di Iorio Sandín (2004); Sánchez (2005); and Vázquez (2010).

³ Borges’s famous statement is: “Recuerdo aquí un ensayo de Thorstein Veblen, sociólogo norteamericano, sobre la preeminencia de los judíos en la cultura occidental. Se pregunta si esta eminencia permite conjeturar una superioridad innata de los judíos, y contesta que no; dice que sobresalen en la cultura occidental porque actúan dentro de esa cultura y al mismo tiempo no se sienten atados a ella por una devoción especial; ‘por eso—dice—a un judío le será más fácil que a un occidental no judío innovar en la cultura occidental’; y lo mismo podemos decir de los irlandeses en la cultura de Inglaterra... Creo que los argentinos, los sudamericanos en general, estamos en una situación análoga; podemos manejar todos los temas europeos, manejarlos sin supersticiones, con una irreverencia que puede tener, y ya tiene, consecuencias afortunadas” (1989: 272–3).

⁴ I am referring to Michel de Certeau’s (1984: 91–110) contrast between the totalizing, panoptical, legible gaze produced from the privileged vantage points of the modern city, such as the top of skyscrapers like the old World Trade Center, and the elusive, illegible, and corporal practices through which everyday walkers in the city create meanings that are alternative to that official totalizing view.

⁵ For a lucid reading of the racial colonial history that informs *Down These Mean Streets* within current colonial and postcolonial debates, see Martínez-San Miguel (2010).

⁶ See Cruz-Malavé (1996).

⁷ On the importance of shame as a structuring affect in Puerto Rican cultural practices, see Negrón-Muntaner (2004), LaFountain-Stokes (2011) and Cruz-Malavé (1996: 95–119).

⁸ For complementary readings of *Down These Mean Streets* that focus on the disavowal of femininity, see Reid-Pharr (1996) and Sáchez (2005).

⁹ *El Velorio* is perhaps the Puerto Rican painting that has been the subject of more artistic reworkings than any other. See for instance Jorge Soto’s painting *El Velorio de Oller en Nueva York* (1975), Rafael Trelles’s *Visitas al Velorio* (1996), and Antonio Martorell’s recent art book *El velorio (no vela)* (2010).

REFERENCES

- Borges, Jorge Luis. 1989. *Obras completas*. II. Barcelona: Emecé Editores.
- Butler, Judith. 1997. *The Psychic Life of Power*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Caminero-Santangelo, Marta. 2007. *On Latinidad: U.S. Latino Literature and the Construction of Ethnicity*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press.

- Cruz-Malavé, Arnaldo. 1996. What a Tangled Web!: Masculinity, Abjection, and the Foundations of Puerto Rican Literature in the United States. *differences* 8(1): 132–51.
- . 2007. *Queer Latino Testimonio*, Keith Haring, Juanito Xtravaganza: *Hard Tails*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- de Certeau, Michel. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- di Iorio Sandín, Lyn. 2004. *Killing Spanish: Literary Essays on Ambivalent U.S. Latino/a Identity*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Edelman, Lee. 1994. *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory*. New York: Routledge.
- Eng, David and Shinhee Han. 2003. A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia. In *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, eds. David Eng and David Kazanjian. 343–71. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Every Child Is Born a Poet: The Life and Work of Piri Thomas*. 2003. Produced and directed by Jonathan Robinson. New Haven, CT: When In Doubt Productions.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1989. Melancholia and Mourning. In *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay. 584–89. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Hernández, Carmen Dolores. 1997. *Puerto Rican Voices in English: Interviews with Writers*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Isaac, Allan Punzalan. 2006. *American Tropics: Articulating Filipino America*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- La Fountain-Stokes, Lawrence. 2011. Gay Shame, Latina- and Latino-Style: A Critique of White Queer Performativity. In *Gay Latino Studies: A Critical Reader*, eds. Michael Hames-García and Ernesto Javier Martínez. 55–8. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Martínez-San Miguel, Yolanda. 2010. Coloniality of Diasporas: Racialization of Negropolitans and Nuyoricans in Paris and New York. In *Hispanic Caribbean Literature of Migration*, ed. Vanessa Pérez Rosario. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Martorell, Antonio. 2010. *El Velorio (no vela)*. San Juan: Ediciones RIP.
- Negrón-Muntaner, Frances. 2004. *Boricua Pop: Puerto Ricans and the Latinization of American Culture*. New York: NYU Press.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1954. *The Philosophy of Nietzsche*. New York: The Modern Library.
- Noel, Urayoán. 2008. NYPR Blues: Experimentalism, Performance, and the Articulation of Diaspora in Nuyorican Poetry. Ph.D. Dissertation, New York University.
- Reid-Pharr, Robert. 1996. Tearing the Goat's Flesh: Homosexuality, Abjection, and the Production of a Late Twentieth-Century Black Masculinity. *Studies in the Novel* 28(3): 372–94.
- Reyes, Israel. 2005. *Humor and the Eccentric Text in Puerto Rican Literature*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.
- Ríos Ávila, Rubén. 2002. *La raza cómica*. San Juan: Ediciones Callejón.
- Said, Edward W. 1975. *Beginnings: Intention and Method*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press.
- Sánchez, Marta E. 2005. *Shakin' Up Race and Gender: Intercultural Connections in Puerto Rican, African American, and Chicano Narratives and Culture (1965–1995)*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. 1990. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Thomas, Piri. 1968. *Down These Mean Streets*. New York: New American Library.
- . 1972. *Savior, Savior, Hold My Hand*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company.
- Vázquez, David J. 2011. *Triangulations: Narrative Strategies for Navigating Latino Identity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Viego, Antonio. 2007. *Dead Subjects: Toward a Politics of Loss in Latino Studies*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.