

**“Underground Masculinities”:
Racial and Sexual Trauma in *Down These Mean Streets*
by Angel M. Diaz**

In Piri Thomas's *Down These Mean Streets*, racial identity appears as the main character's greatest concern and is the driving force and thread of the narrative. The search for that racial identity—which is, as we know, always dynamic—moves and directs the plot toward an encounter with another type of identity: the sexual one. Although not the first memoir or novel written by a Latino in the United States, this text was widely circulated and has been continuously published since 1967. *Down These Mean Streets* became an essential text in the study of the Latinx experience in the United States, the Puerto Rican diaspora, and African-American-Latinx relations.

Piri, the main character and narrator of the text, wants to know the degree of his blackness (how black he is) and whether he can use his “Puerto Ricanness” as a whitening agent— a “buffer”— against the racism of the hegemonic social entity and the ideological apparatus of the State in 1940s New York. “If you could dig the way I feel, you'd see I was hung up between two sticks” (122), Piri explains to his best friend Brew, an African American youth of the same age, to help him understand his identity conflict. Piri, for his part, sees himself caught between a rock and a hard place, between racial whiteness and black identity, between “passing” as “non-black” or accepting being black and being marked and vilified for the color of his skin.

Piri tortures himself psychologically because he internalizes the conflict between two identities that he assumes as his own but does not understand. His issues

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surrounding his identity stem from being born and brought up in a diverse nuclear family. Piri's father disavows his own Blackness to favor an "indio" (or mestizo) identity. Piri is the darkest of his siblings, who can all pass as white. His internalization of his father's self-racism leads to his own trauma. Cathy Caruth has explained how the traumatic event is an experience that keeps coming back as flashbacks or intrusive memories. It is the body's way to process an unthinkable situation. In trauma, repetition builds a sort of knowledge of the event until its psychological mastery.

Down These Mean Streets can be read variously as a coming-of-age narrative, a fight to understand minoritarian racial and ethnic identity, and an immigrant story in a violent environment. Thomas merges all these threads and adds a series of highly sexual scenes to the narrative. I posit that Piri is a traumatized character tangling with a fluid racial identity not understood by the United States or by himself. It is within the frame of misunderstood racial fluidity that another layer of trauma is added to the text; Piri's traumatic sexual initiation and fluid sexuality are, I also argue, key components of *Down These Mean Streets*.

Almost by surprise, readers find Piri having sex with various partners, sometimes in groups and sometimes individually. The encounters are both public and private, repetitive, and often aggressive, if not violent. In the first of these encounters, Piri has sex, despite his young age, with a so-called Puerto Rican "transvestite."¹ As the

¹Marta V. Vicente underscores how Vek Lewis and Manuel Roberto Escobar have addressed how "such categories" as transexual or transvestite "have symbolic currency in many countries in Latin America. Rather than hiding trans identities, by reclaiming the word *travestis* and *transsexual*, the person is in fact turning the queer body into a site of protest and subversive

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autobiographical novel progresses, he engages in sexual activity with white women. He foregoes his promiscuity when he becomes engaged to a Puerto Rican woman from the archipelago.²

Piri's sexual initiation occurs with a Puerto Rican trans woman who is much older than him. This first sexual interaction takes place at the beginning of his adolescence under the influence of a group of gang members. Piri—as the narrator—appears to “blame” peer pressure for the encounter, even as it serves as a form of masculine validation. Paradoxically, in the Latino ghettoized communities of New York during the 1940s and 50s, demonstrations of manhood were only valid through sexual penetration (in this case, oral). My reading of the text establishes how Thomas seems to take for granted that, in the process of constructing masculinity in El Barrio, it does not matter whether a woman or another man is penetrated. For the narrator, the act of penetrating, of being the dominant male, is considered more valuable than any perceived submission.

When Piri's family moves to Long Island from El Barrio, he meets and sleeps with Betty, a young white nurse. Betty is receptive and quickly falls in love with the protagonist. Later, Piri has a sexual encounter (which may have been imagined) in a subway car with an anonymous young white woman and, almost halfway through the

potential” (*Transgender: A Useful Category*, 430). Although there is a recent interest in reclaiming the term, I will not use it further and, instead, will use the more encompassing “trans.”

² Critics Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé and Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel have called Piri Thomas's text an “autobiographical novel” instead of a memoir. I will follow suit.

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book, with a prostitute in Texas. Upon his return to New York, Piri sleeps with Dulcien, a Puerto Rican girl who becomes pregnant, and he consequently rejects. Based on these sexualized interactions, I will develop the use of the scenes in the plot of the autobiographical novel to give way to a meditation on the relationship between the binary racial paradigm in the United States and the conception of masculinity that Piri constructs throughout the plot. I argue that Piri forges a traumatic masculinity that revolves around his understanding of the precepts of race in the Barrio.

Piri's sexuality in *Down These Mean Streets* largely reflects the protagonist's concern about his identity in a homogeneous space. It is in the social space of the United States that racial division makes it impossible to escape its ideological conception as a binary system, as there are only two possible racial readings: white (dominant) and black (submissive). Piri cannot be read as either white or black within the American racial paradigm because he is considered an "other," an *always already* foreigner. His concern about his racial identification begins early in his life because his skin is much darker than that of his siblings, who can "pass" as white Americans. For example, Piri and his brother José begin to discuss what Piri perceives as his racial problem. This discussion escalates until it reaches a physical confrontation. José does not want to understand his brother's arguments and tries to convince him that they are all "white":

I ain't black, damn you! Look at my hair. It's almost blond. My eyes are blue, my nose straight. My motherfuckin' lips are not like a baboon's ass. My skin is white.

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White, goddamit! White! Maybe Poppa's a little dark, but that's the Indian blood in him. He's got white blood [...] we ain't Negroes. We're Puerto Ricans and we're white. (144-45)

José's rejection of Blackness and defense of the family's supposed whiteness has to be viewed in the context of both their Puerto Rican ethnicity and the migratory experience of the family in the United States. While in Puerto Rico race is viewed as degrees of separation from whiteness, in the United States the one-drop rule made the approximation impossible.

Furthermore, Juan Perea argues in "The Black/White Binary Paradigm of Race" that the

"black/white" paradigm in the American racial imagination is linked to a conception that race in America consists, either exclusively or primarily, of only two constituent racial groups, the Black and the White. Many scholars of race reproduce this paradigm when they write and act as though only the White and Black races matter for purposes of discussing race and social policy. (361)

The process of racial invisibility in the United States occurs institutionally and is reproduced in all aspects of society, including in universities and public debate. Through a regulatory system based on racial purity, any "mixture" is identified by percentages and fractions that dictate the exact amount of whiteness or blackness of individuals.

Piri himself expresses this view as he watches people pass by on the street: "I tried to count their different shades and colors, but I gave it up after a while. Anyway, black and white were the most outstanding; all the rest were in between" (120-21). It is

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in the ambiguity of “in-betweenness” that Piri’s racial identity resides. Suffice it to recall how he describes himself and his emotions to his friend as being torn. Piri decides to travel to the southern United States on a journey of self-discovery, and his conception of race changes in the company of Brew. The journey is, in fact, a switch in the narrative. It becomes a *bildungsroman*. As such, it will lead our protagonist to understand himself (and to know himself) as an individual and a citizen in the face of racial problems in the United States.

Down These Mean Streets presents sexual scenes to construct a traumatized sexual representation of the protagonist as an analogy and reflection of the identity conflict in which he finds himself. Piri enters cycles of tenderness and violence in the spaces of physical intimacy he describes. In the act of narrating aspects of his sexuality, he establishes a space parallel to the events of racial identification that occur in his life. I understand that this sexualized and parallel space is the result of the Oedipal relationship the character has with his father. We must consider that the relationship with his father is undoubtedly what generates his racial questioning. Right at the beginning of the text, Piri questions the relationship:

Pops, I wondered, how come me and you are always at odds? Is it something we don’t know anything about? I **wonder if it’s something I’ve done, or something I am.** [...] How come when we all get hit for doing something wrong, I feel it the hardest? Maybe ‘cause I’m the biggest, huh? **Or maybe it’s ‘cause I’m the darkest in this family?** (22, my emphasis)

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Feeling torn between two poles (122), he feels alienated and rejected by his family and by the different ethnic groups in the society in which he lives. This situation effectively traumatizes him, with sexuality becoming another internal battleground.

Russell Meares explains the oscillations of identity in victims of violent and traumatic events in his book *Intimacy and Alienation: Memory, Trauma and Personal Being*: “[the] representation of self, fused with the alien other, produces oscillations in *self-state*, in which at times, the individual appears as the frightened and helpless victim and at others, perhaps a few seconds later, as the traumatizing other” (87). It is in this ambiguity, between feeling like a victim at one moment and a perpetrator at another, that Piri seems to take on a more rebellious role. These are also the poles, the “in-betweenness” that he inhabits. Sexuality is obviously an important part of establishing his own identity. For Piri, assuming his masculinity in “El Barrio” becomes a matter of life and death: “[i]t was all part of becoming a man...” (15). This process of constructing masculinity is, in turn, an acceptance of violence against women and a return to the myth of the “Latin phallus” written about by Ilan Stávans, where manhood was about silence, resilience, toughness, and action. Real men “suck it up” and never open up.

For Piri’s sexual initiation, he goes to the apartment of “the fags” under peer pressure from his group of friends, who will later become a gang. They are all scared, but they all want to belong to the group (55). At this point in the narrative, the essence of what it means to be a “man” for the gang and for the neighborhood is detailed. The

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challenge of going to the place where Piri is assured by his peers that he will have access to sex terrifies him, but he still puts on a “straight face” and accompanies the rest of the group. Manhood is demonstrated with “the heart,” and if you have it, despite your fear, you can face anything. Piri appears to be heterosexual but, paradoxically, must show his “manhood” at the moment of the sexual act with a trans woman. I want to make it clear that, within the codes of the neighborhood during the mid-twentieth century, homosexuals ceased to be “men.” In *Down These Mean Streets*, homosexuals are nothing more than an exaggerated performance of femininity. Piri mentions, while the group is talking about homosexuals, that the conversation moved on to “faggots and their asses which, swinging from side to side, could make a girl look ridiculous, like she wasn't moving” (54). Thus, heteronormativity is apparent: the homosexual in the neighborhood moves in a performative space where he uses hyperbolic femininity at the expense of his masculinity in order to satisfy his sexual desires. In this sense, the reaction and desire to join and be understood within a hyperbolic masculinity makes Piri's own conception of “masculinity” performative.

In turn, young gang members who are initiating themselves into sex accept this performative femininity because it allows them to satisfy their own sexual desires. By establishing this game of complicity, the narrator shows that manhood and heteronormativity are created from a local point of view. According to Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble*, there is no “gender identity” prior to “gender expressions,” but rather that identity is progressively constituted through the performative “expressions”

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of those who assume a sexual identity (34). Thus, the performative game of sexuality in the neighborhood is one of aggression and domination, of submission and surrender. Masculinity in the neighborhood is only constructed through its hyperbolization. In other words, in the neighborhood's space of sexual action, men must be more than men and homosexuals more feminine than women.

The group of young men sees the trans characters, Antonia and Concha, as homosexuals, not men, yet not quite women. As such, the conversation between the trans women reproduced in the autobiographical novel is extremely important in showing how violence is related to this vision of masculinity, femininity, and homosexuality. Antonia explicitly narrates "her first time," or first sexual encounter, with an abusive partner. Antonia recalls constant aggression where her sexual pleasure is not important, but rather that of the "man." The fury with which the sexual acts take place gives way to Antonia's admission of a "need" to continue seeing the anonymous abusive man. By victimizing herself, she enters into a supposedly feminine role where the domestic violence marks her gender as "woman" because she shares the role of victim. Antonia's character is defined within the social patterns established in the neighborhood by her "feminine" ability to endure her partner's sexual violence. Concha, on the other hand, admits to being sexually assaulted by four men. But she does so in response to Antonia's challenge in the debate about abuse-enduring "true" femininity. "Don't make it sound so *important*, bitch," Antonia says to Concha, immediately following up with "You can take fifty times that over" (57). Concha then goes on to explain how having her

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“period” made it uncomfortable. But is it possible for any woman to talk so casually about such a horrific rape? And if she does, is it only uncomfortable because she is menstruating? Moreover, the bleeding is actually the result of the sexual violence to which Antonia was subjected. By equating the blood resulting from the rape with menstruation, Antonia reinforces a hyperbolic image of what it means to be a woman.

Piri mentions that “[i]f I had my eyes closed, I would have sworn these were real broads talking” (58). But this is not the case. His ignorance of women is obvious. Piri is unfamiliar with female dialogue or does not consider it important. I want to underscore that sexual violence becomes a motif in the book. Later in the narrative, Alayce, Brew’s romantic partner, begins to talk about how she was raped by four young white men, but she is unable to finish recounting the horror of what happened. This testimony in the middle of the plot is paradoxical because only moments before, Brew had hit Alayce. Brew assaulted her because he was enraged to hear her talk about race and not being “proud” to be black. The text uses a series of parallels and repetitions that can be understood as traumatic displacements.

During the trans women’s dialogue, Piri drinks whiskey and smokes marijuana as an excuse to get “hot.” Piri appears to enter a surreal space where time slows down. He is now on the verge of having oral sex with her. But first, his mind wanders under the influence of marijuana. His fantasy focuses on his gang’s fights against a rival gang, the Jolly Rogers:

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Then the Jolly Rogers walk in and everybody starts dealing. Your boys are fighting and you fall in with them. Bottles are hitting everything but the walls. You feel somebody put his damn fist square in your damn mouth and split your damn lip and you taste your own sweet blood—and all of a sudden you're really glad you came [...] you're glad for another chance to prove how much heart you got [...] the best is the walk back to the block, with the talk about the heart shown in the rumble. The question put down and the answer given. (59-60)

We observe how there is a direct relationship between violence and sexual acts. Cathy Caruth has explained how the traumatic event is an experience that is not fully assimilated, and that continuously returns to the psyche to make itself so. The most dramatic “return” is in the form of intrusive memories that are constantly repeated as if they are happening again for the first time. Piri’s prelude to intimate contact is to return to the space of violence, which becomes pleasant because he dared to allow “a man” to perform fellatio on him or because he showed “heart” in the fight.

Bessel van der Kolk, on the other hand, states in his book *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society* that:

[t]he traumatic neuroses give a clear indication that a fixation on the traumatic incident lies at their root. These patients regularly repeat the traumatic neuroses in their dreams, where [...] we find that the attack conforms to a complete transplanting of the patient into the traumatic

situation. It is as if the patient has not finished with the traumatic situation.

(55)

Although the narrative does not portray the fights as causing trauma, recalling them indicates that the experience has not been fully incorporated into the psyche. Perhaps trauma goes back further to the moment when Piri had to endure being beaten by his own father. Piri, supposedly drunk and under the influence of marijuana, recalls or has a *flashback* and then acts on it. Note that according to Cathy Caruth, “[t]he history that a flashback tells [...] is, therefore, a history that literally *has no place*, neither in the past, in which it was not fully experienced, nor in the present, in which its precise images and enactments are not fully understood” (153). During the sexual moment, Piri asserts that:

I dug the lie before me. Antonia was blowin’ Waneko and Indio at the same time. Alfredo was screwing La Vieja. The springs on the bed were squeaking like a million mice. Waneko’s eyes were closed and he was breathing hard. Indio’s face was white and scared and expectant, but his body was moving in time with Antonia’s **outrage**. (61, my emphasis)

In this quote, if we return for a moment to Butler’s assessment, Piri accepts performativity and fantasy. The spectacle attracts him. He is looking at the faces of his male friends. Despite acknowledging that he “likes the lie,” Piri feels “paralyzed” in front of it. This lack of control is his desire. His paralysis does not occur, as he tries to reason, because of alcohol or marijuana, but rather because his desire was stimulated by the orgy he witnessed and participated in. Seeing his friends with “fake” women excites him.

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Piri's sexual initiation with a trans woman opens a space of contradiction between dominance and vulnerability that complicates his performance of masculinity. In this sense, Piri's first sexual act is not merely an instance of peer-induced bravado, but an initiation into a broader economy of representation in which racial and sexual marginality are intertwined. His performance of hypermasculinity, while meant to affirm heterosexuality and racial belonging, simultaneously exposes the instability of both. The trans woman's presence—mocked and desired—reveals the fragile ground on which Piri's masculinity stands, echoing Cruz-Malavé's insight that the Latino male body often becomes the very site where the colonial binary of power and shame is reenacted and undone (*Queer Latino Testimonio* 99-118).

It is important to highlight what the narrator describes as Antonia's *outrage* or atrocity. By choosing a word with such violent connotations, he confirms the role of aggression and how it intertwines with pleasure in her first sexual experience. Here, then, a binary system is articulated in which desire and violence are also the poles between which Piri is stretched. This presents what Butler calls an "oppressive context" (172) in which Piri's heterosexuality is at stake, where his "manhood" could be called into question. It is understood that the only way to enter or leave this space is through the acceptance or rejection of the group. Masculinity is then constructed and reinforced through relationships with other males in the gang: his perceived peers. If the group finds this type of sexual activity acceptable, it is understood that Piri can maintain his heterosexual "credibility."

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In *Triangulations: Narrative Strategies for Navigating Latino Identities*, David J.

Vázquez deciphers the code of masculinity inherent in the text that Piri seems to trace during the description of the sexual event: Piri represents himself as a victim in a sexual encounter oriented around asserting his masculinity. The logic of Piri's description holds that to assert masculinity, one must be prepared to engage in homosexuality (80). For example, near the end of the text's narrative, Piri is interrupted while having sex with Dulcien, a girlfriend, in his aunt's apartment. He is interrupted by Chino, Dulcien's cousin, who reproaches him for sleeping with her. Piri once again shows the possibility of homosexual sex as violence by responding to Chino with: "So what. Am I screwing you? —wait your turn or get the hell outta here" (224).

The need to be accepted by the group through his masculinity further marks his racial crisis. Piri embodies a victimization of his own ambiguous cosmogony, where racial and sexual identity are imbued with violence and the need to belong to a group. If we go back to Piri's narrative regarding his initial sex act, it continues with a description of his body's reactions, that space where the sexual debate lives:

I tightened my own body. It was doing the same as Indio's. It was too late. I sucked my belly in and felt the hot wetness of heat. I looked down in time to see my pee-pee disappear into Concha's mouth. I felt the roughness of his tongue as it both scared and pleased me. I like *broads*, I like *muchachas*, I like *girls* I chanted inside me. (61)

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It is interesting that just when he mentions Concha's mouth, he changes the possessive pronoun to a masculine one: "the roughness of **his** tongue." He simultaneously feels fear and pleasure and tries to convince himself that he is heterosexual. But in order to maintain his heterosexual identity, Piri has to separate himself from his desire. Robert Reid-Pharr elucidates this separation in his article, "Tearing the Goat's Flesh..." by stating that "Thomas maintains a distinction between himself and his sexual desire, producing, for a moment, the former as the victim of the latter" (612). This victimization of desire manifests a development of his manhood from a position that assumes trauma. By fragmenting himself, by dividing himself between his carnal desire and his own identity, Piri is clearly established as a victim of the symptoms of trauma. Moreover, Bessel van der Kolk explains that people respond with conflicting or dissimilar emotions when confronted with a traumatic situation and are unable to grasp the complexity of the situation they face (348). By doing the same thing as Indio, he identifies homoerotically with his friend. This identification validates his masculinity beyond the homosexual act.

Reid-Pharr also refers to what he calls "singing" in "three vernaculars" when Piri tries to reinforce his masculinity by repeating that he likes women (612). By emphasizing the change in code, he establishes his masculinity in Spanish, referring us back to his identity crisis. Piri describes the harshness of Concha's tongue to indicate that it is a masculine tongue. But even so, the protagonist feels pleasure. So, the only way he has to respond to feelings of pleasure with another man is through violence. Although Piri is not violent, his friend Alfredo beats La Vieja up. This is accepted by the group. Violence

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is part of the sexual relationship and is not to be questioned. Violence against “homosexuals” ensures that dominance and control over fear of one’s own sexuality is maintained. Upon leaving the apartment, Piri explains that “I hadn’t liked the scene...” (62), contradicting what he said earlier: that he “liked the lie.” It also contradicts the fantasies of group violence he had when he first became sexually active.

The second narrative moment that concerns me is when Piri is already living in the suburbs of Long Island with his family. They aspire to leave behind their life in the old neighborhood. Before delving into my analysis, I think it is pertinent to bring up “The Black Man and the White Woman” from Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*. In the chapter, Fanon describes the mental state of black men in relation to white women and confesses to a type of trauma that manifests itself in him: “I wish to be acknowledged not as black but as white. Now... who but a white woman can do this for me? By loving me she proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man. I am a white man” (63). Being loved by a white woman validates Piri’s identity and equates it with that of a white man. The problem is that it is not enough for society.

Piri begins dating a white girl, Betty, whom he meets at the hospital where he works. Once, when returning by train from El Barrio, Piri confronts two white men who insult and degrade him. The fury with which he responds to the insults shows how the conflict of identity, as a black man and as a man, forces him to show, once again, “heart.” Piri insults the two young men violently, but he is interrupted and cannot attack them

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physically. Then, at the end of the journey, he and his girlfriend find a vacant parcel of land and have sex in public:

We got off in Babylon and found a field, and I made love to her. **In anger, in hate, I took out my madness on her.** She understood and kept saying, “I don't care what they think—I love you, I love you.” But inside me I kept saying, ***Damn it, I hate you—no, not you, just your damn color. My God, why am I in the middle?*** (90, my emphasis)

Once again, Piri presents the traumatic process he finds himself in, as the victim of racism that becomes sexually aggressive. The attitude of revenge can only be explained from the narrator's point of view. Here, Piri expresses all his rage against the person who loves him. He has violent sex to the point of showing hatred. The violent act may be akin to sexual assault because of the violent charge that Piri puts into it, even though Betty consents. Racial trauma turns into sexual violence, or, at the very least, sexual aggressiveness. Piri victimizes his partner, the person he loves, because he was the victim of insults from white men. Piri's internal questioning points once again to the racial polarization he seems to be caught in and reinforces the Oedipal vectors stemming from his relationship with his dark-skinned father and light-skinned mother.

How is it possible for Piri to feel caught between the two extremes of the binary racial system in the United States if society cannot distinguish him from any other black man? Betty claims to understand Piri's situation. She keeps repeating her love for him while the aggressive sexual act takes place. She willingly becomes a victim of violence.

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Why does Betty assume a passive and willing role? Meares explains that in a traumatic situation, the roles of victim and perpetrator merge, and the state of anxiety is internalized as one of well-being (92). In this part of the narrative, a transfer of blame occurs, and the situation is transformed into a questioning of the racial-cultural policies present at that time. This process is subverted by the narrator's confession of his violence. But this violence goes beyond Betty.

For Piri, sexual violence becomes a temporary remedy for the systemic degradation that black people endure in the United States. As William Luis explains, it represents, for Thomas, "a counter discourse to the discourse of power. Thomas' rejection of mainstream culture allows him to align himself with everything contrary to what society symbolizes" (33). So, this movement toward American blackness represents not only a counter-discourse, but also an attempt to bring his masculinity closer to the state it was in when engaging with homosexuals. In marginality, he is validated by his group and therefore by himself. Piri enters a state in which his masculinity, due to identity trauma, resurfaces violently to fit in with his new status as a Latino and Black male.

Later, in chapter 14: "Learning Some New ABC's," Piri is on a New York City subway platform during rush hour. Upon entering one of the overly crowded train cars, he is pushed by the passengers and only finds space right behind a young white woman. Piri has an erection and is afraid of the woman's reaction because he is sure she must have felt it. She is not frightened; on the contrary, she settles in and turns to face him.

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The only dialogue that occurs between them can be read as a courtesy; they simply discussed that she was going to stand in front of him to keep her balance in such a crowded place, but also as a way of accepting the complicity of what will happen between them. As the train moves, their bodies press against each other, and a public sexual encounter takes place. The speed of the train, which we can read as a metaphor for sexual energy, brings them closer and closer together. Piri caresses her breasts, and she moves to the rhythm of the train and in time with Piri (135-37). Upon arriving at 14th Street station, Piri and the young white woman share an orgasm: “We were roaring into the 14th Street station. *Hurry, hurry*, our bodies urged and swoom-ooo-mmm—girl and me and train got to the station at the same time” (137).

This description of casual sex is important because it prepares us for the construction of a narrative that comes from the narrator’s fantasy. As the experience ends, Piri “invents” a conversation between the young woman and her female friends. In it, the anonymous young woman discusses how ashamed she was to have had this sexual encounter that culminated in orgasm with a black man. It is important to note that in his fantasy, Piri assumes that the young woman is married. Piri, perhaps unconsciously, recreates the notion of the Black man as a sexualized entity with no other value. The paradox resides in the outcome of this narrative created by the author. At the moment of separation at the train station, the young woman points out in her imagined dialogue that: “I just got away from there. I looked back once to see if he was following me and saw him looking over the heads of people as though he was looking for

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someone. In that one second, I was never so ashamed of myself” (141). Her imaginary partner then comments on the encounter, saying that it is one of those things that are wrong but fun because, again, the man is “black,” and then moves on to the paradoxical element that interests us: “You don’t understand. I **was ashamed because I wanted to fight my way back to him**” (141, my emphasis).

By appropriating the voice of the white woman, the author creates the possibility of acceptance by racist American society through Fanon’s proposal and his possible romantic relationship. Piri’s mention that it was a momentary situation, lasting only a few seconds, *breaks time* within his narrative and thus merges his desires for acceptance with the “masculine” power he believes he has. By bringing the young woman to orgasm, Piri enters, albeit imaginarily, into the hegemony of white (dominant) American discourse. This narrative creates a false memory of what could have been. Trauma is understood as a process in which the narrative of memory is constantly debated and difficult to internalize by the victim. The sense of self splits into two to heal physical and/or mental wounds. Meares explains it more concisely:

[t]hose traumatic experiences which cause uncoupling of consciousness will also involve the creation of quasi-narratives which give these experiences meaning, and which are recorded in memory systems earlier than those of autobiographical and episodic memory. The traumata are not recorded as incidents, but as a form of ‘knowledge’....” (79-80)

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Piri creates a narrative that is primal. By creating an equivalence between his sexual prowess and acceptance by “white people,” Piri manifests an incomplete masculinity, where one is only a man when accepted and able to sexually satisfy his white partner. Piri believes he has this “knowledge” and assumes or imagines a hyperbolic masculinity in order to be accepted, even if it is under an incomplete identity that excludes his *latinidad*.

On the other hand, Piri senses the young woman’s “shame.” But her shame is related to the concept of “race” that Piri is trying to resolve. Although it could be read as a positive episode of acceptance, it is the girl’s delayed reaction, her inability to “fight” for him, that adds to the problematization of this fantasy. She cannot go back to him even if she wants him. Piri recognizes two factors that would make it impossible for them to have a future together. First, in his fantasy, he imagines her married, and second, knowing that she is a white girl would not allow him to establish a productive relationship. Thus, all the power of his masculine sexual prowess seems to be at odds with the “reality” of the moment. Although his masculinity may result in a momentary positive sexual interaction, it cannot give him a place in a “white” world. Piri’s “manhood” is shattered even in his own fantasies.

The last sexual encounter that I want to analyze takes place in Texas. In his wanderings through the South, Piri meets a Mexican man and, after chatting for a while, convinces him to take him to a brothel. The Mexican man initially hesitates but agrees to accompany Piri to the brothel if he promises not to speak a word of English. It is so that

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Piri can “pass” for Puerto Rican. Upon arriving at the brothel, Piri and his new friend are greeted by a man, perhaps the owner, who questions Piri’s nationality. Piri and his friend then speak in Spanish to prove that he is not African-American.³ Each goes to their own room accompanied by white prostitutes. After having sex and shouting a warning to his Mexican friend, Piri recounts the explosion of racially identifying himself as Black. He announced to the prostitute: “‘Baby, I just want you to know,’—and I watched her smile fall off and a look of horror fill the empty space it left— ‘I just want you to know,’ I repeated, ‘that you got fucked ... *by a black man!*’” (189). Piri states and assumes his identity as a Black man in front of a white woman, but the woman is a prostitute. This social class distinction renders the “proof” of racialized masculinity almost useless. It is my contention that since both are marginalized (Piri because of his skin color, the prostitute because of her profession and social class), forcing this “knowledge” upon her serves only the purpose of an attempt at dismantling white supremacy through shock in a woman who has no power to dismantle institutional and cultural racism.

Piri’s statement is comparable to the story told by Fanon, in which a Black man shouts “long live Schoelcher” (63) at the moment of orgasm. For the Black man described by Fanon, there is a moment of gratitude towards power, because the abolition of chattel slavery allows him to sleep with a white woman. In *Down These Mean Streets*, there is no such vision of gratitude, but rather a determination to challenge power. Piri mentions that he “wants to prove something” (188). He proves that

³ In the text the term “African-American” is not used but instead a racial epithet is employed.

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he is smart and cunning as he deceives both the owner of the brothel and the prostitute. Here, the brothel functions as a replacement for racist Jim Crow society, and he ends up marginalizing himself even further. Piri flees the place without expecting any reaction, except for the surprised and ashamed facial expressions of the prostitute.

Piri embraces his Blackness, but he assumes the racial epithet before describing himself as a Black man. This indicates that the binary racial discourse of the United States is still fixed in his mind and speech. Piri degrades himself with the epithet, although it can also be read as a subversion of the insult to appropriate it and challenge “white” authority. This challenge and insult to “white” authority seen in the character of the prostitute can be clarified by Marta Sánchez, who argues that Piri affiliates himself with “...the imperial conqueror, the racially and sexually ‘superior’ male who penetrates and colonizes the racially and sexually ‘inferior’ female” (122). Although I do not share the view that Piri feels “racially” superior to the prostitute, I understand that Sánchez’s words explain Piri’s desire, perhaps not for affiliation, but for challenging power. Ilan Stavans makes a similar observation to Sánchez when he points out that “Hispanic men are machos, dominating figures, rulers, conquistadors—and also, closeted homosexuals.” He then concludes with the most forceful statement of the importance of masculinity for Latin men: “The Latin man and his penis are at the center of the Hispanic universe” (230).

Piri also makes the penis the center of his universe as a way to conquer and dominate. Through the process of constructing his racial identity, he adds a second one,

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that of constructing his masculinity. The trauma of trying to secure his identity makes him both victim and perpetrator. While he tries to develop as a “man” in the neighborhood, Piri creates and recreates an unfinished masculinity given the threat presented by Stávans of always being potentially homosexual. With this article, I wanted to show how questions of identity give way to a display of hyperbolic and performative masculinity in front of queer subjects and cis women, creating traumas that Piri tries to ignore but which keep returning and haunting him. The author himself, in an interview with Carmen Dolores Hernández, points out that “[w]hat a lot of people don’t understand is how in writing *Down These Mean Streets*, I would feel the psychological pain of opening up Pandora’s Box once again and bringing back to mind my past” (180). It is in relation to his memories and his past that he refers to his pain, to his history.

Cathy Caruth comments on the relationship between the pathology of traumatic memories and history: “...it is not a pathology, that is, of falsehood or displacement of meaning, but of history itself.” She concludes that the traumatized victim carries an impossible history within themselves, or even that these victims become the symptom of a history they cannot fully comprehend (5). The history that cannot be fully grasped is the history of Piri Thomas: the history of a Black, macho Puerto Rican; the history of a boy who wanted above all else to belong to a group, to identify with his nationality, to become a man in front of everyone; the history of ambivalence, where identity trauma merges with gender and sexuality trauma. In *Down These Mean Streets*, Thomas seeks to construct a masculinity that underscores his ethnicity and highlights it. Piri moves

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from the ambiguity of his crisis to the acceptance of his multiple identities, except one:
that of a man who had engaged in homosexual acts.

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