

QUEERING AMERICAN SPACE IN PIRI THOMAS'S *DOWN THESE MEAN STREETS*: A GLISSANTIAN APPROACH TO KINSHIP¹

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes Piri Thomas's autobiographical novel *Down These Mean Streets* (1967) through the critical framework of the plantation theorised by Caribbean scholars Édouard Glissant and Antonio Benítez-Rojo. Taking into account the alternative affiliative networks that developed in the plantation, the novel by Thomas presents a similar contestation to biological kinship along the protagonist's peregrination across different American post-plantation spaces through the relationships that he establishes there. Following the *bildungsroman* tradition, the protagonist undergoes a process of knowledge acquisition which serves to unveil the ever-lasting presence of the coloniality of power theorised by Anibal Quijano in the lives of black youths in the United States. Nevertheless, these spaces recall the plantation's potential, as Glissant saw it, for the subversion of the state's racist ideologies, as their underlying structures differ from the epistemologies institutionalised in the course of Western colonial history.

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza la novela autobiográfica de Piri Thomas *Down These Mean Streets* (1967) a través del marco crítico de la plantación teorizado por los intelectuales caribeños Édouard Glissant y Antonio Benítez-Rojo. Tomando en consideración que en la plantación se

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desarrollaron redes afiliativas alternativas, la novela de Thomas presenta una refutación similar al parentesco biológico a lo largo de la peregrinación del protagonista por diferentes lugares de pos-plantación americanos a través de las relaciones que establece en ellos. Siguiendo la tradición del *bildungsroman*, el protagonista experimenta un proceso de adquisición de conocimiento que sirve para desenmascarar la presencia de la colonialidad del poder que Anibal Quijano teorizó en la vida de los jóvenes negros en Estados Unidos. Sin embargo, estos lugares recuperan el potencial de la plantación, según Glissant, para revertir las ideologías racistas del estado, pues sus estructuras subyacentes difieren de las epistemologías institucionalizadas a lo largo de la historia colonial occidental.

INTRODUCTION

Puerto Rican literature written in the United States is difficult to categorise. Can we really assess it as immigrant fiction? Puerto Rico, a former Spanish colony, was ceded to the United States after the Spanish-American War at the beginning of the 20th century and, although American politicians have claimed that the island was never an American colony, that the United States never possessed any colonies, it was not immediately annexed as a new state (Pierce Flores 81-98). In fact, it has never been. Puerto Ricans are citizens of the United States since 1916 thanks to the Jones Act (Pierce Flores 82), but the island's statehood has been postponed or evaded for decades through what Sam Erman calls "creative ambiguity"—legal and constitutional detours taken by the institutions and administrations to counteract "perceived conflicts between Constitution and empire" (1240). Furthermore, the statehood claim is not that majoritarian in Puerto Rico (Pierce Flores 98). Independence movements also exist in the island, but they are clearly minoritarian (Acosta Cruz 4); the more widespread feeling without doubt is contentment with the island's commonwealth status (Acosta Cruz 3; Pierce Flores 102).

Taking this colonial history into consideration, is Puerto Rican fiction postcolonial literature? There are not so many differences, in fact, between the discourses of immigration and postcolonial ones. Migration from former colonies is the most extensive one, having even been termed diaspora, especially after decolonisation, as Jenny Sharpe explains:

The designation of 'postcolonial' as an umbrella term for diasporic and minority communities is derived, in part, from an understanding of decolonization as the beginning of an unprecedented migration of peoples from the ex-colonies to advanced industrial centers. (182)

Furthermore, some critics defend the idea that the oppression of ethnic minorities in the United States responds to a regime of internal colonialism. Robert Blauner suggests that, despite differences, the process of power dispossession with regards to ethnic minorities in the United States—particularly blacks—follows the same mechanisms as traditional colonialism. One of these mechanisms is the institutionalised ghetto, whose inhabitants, according to Blauner, do not participate in the decision taking of the neighbourhood or own businesses or property (396-8). Ghettos, then, behave as internal colonies within the United States.

One of the reasons for denying Puerto Rico its immediate statehood at the time of annexation was cultural difference based on language (Pierce Flores 78). As such, it is understandable that Puerto Ricans live in the United States as migrants—“citizens yet foreigners,” in Juan González’s words (253)—or are considered as so in their social relations with mainstream Americans. On the other hand, some Puerto Ricans are black, like the protagonist of the autobiography that will be analyzed in this article. In fact, both these matters were early addressed during the first debates in the United States Congress regarding the potential statehood of Puerto Rico, when political leaders claimed that Puerto Ricans “were of a different *race* [...] and would not fit into the Anglo-Saxon *cultural* and moral traditions of the United States” (emphasis mine; Pierce-Flores 78). This discourse is painfully reminiscent of colonial supremacist arguments that justified domination and administration.

However, there are some who argue against the postcolonial categorisation, like Jenny Sharpe who problematises this model as being too simplistic because it homogenises the histories of all migrants and ethnic minorities into one single coherent narrative (182). In fact, Jorge J. Klor de Alva claims that not even all former colonies can be considered postcolonial territories. This consideration was already well assumed for now hegemonic territories like the United States (Boehmer 8), but Klor de Alva argues that Latin American countries too resembled this model since “the elites who triumphed in the wars of independence [...] were

never colonial subjects” (245); they were largely Westernised and did not undergo a process of cultural and political decolonisation (247). However, the imperialist relations of the United States with the (also Hispanic) Caribbean islands and even within its own territory clearly bear a pattern of domination which, as Aníbal Quijano has repeatedly contended, follows a logic of coloniality² (“Latin America” 533; 561).

Piri Thomas’ 1967 autobiographical novel *Down These Mean Streets* is a literary work where all these confluences and irreconciliations are reflected. It narrates, in the *bildungsroman* mode, the growing up process of Piri, a young black boy born to Puerto Rican parents in Harlem who confronts the realities of racism in the 1940s United States³. The novel has been claimed by Latino and African American traditions (Sosa-Velasco 288) because in it the problematics related to nationality, linguistic difference, class, and racial difference are intersected, but the work clearly does not fit any clear-cut categorisation. Caribbean critics Édouard Glissant and Antonio Benítez-Rojo have proposed the framework of the plantation to analyze fictions such as this. In this sense, they contest nationalist limitations in literary analysis which would only tie them to the epistemologies of domination that they seek to overturn. This post-essentialist postnational approach to American cultures manages to accurately account for the differences in the territory’s national historiographies while at the same time analysing the hemispheric pattern of domination which pervades throughout the Americas and which nationalist discourse has in fact precluded.

² Aníbal Quijano has weaved the theory of the “patrón de poder mundial capitalista” around the idea that with the conquest of the Americas capitalist power became global and structured around two axes that now prevail worldwide (“Clasificación” 342): the coloniality of power (which organises labour and social relations around the idea of “race”) (“Democracia” 58) and modernity (a Eurocentric mode for knowledge production assumed as universal) (“Clasificación” 343; “Modernidad/Racionalidad” 14).

³ From now on I will refer to the protagonist as Piri to differentiate character from author.

THE PLANTATION: A POST-ESSENTIALIST ANALYSIS OF CARIBBEAN/AMERICAN LITERATURE

the ruins of the Plantation have
affected American cultures all
around (Glissant 72)

Piri Thomas's *Down These Mean Streets* reflects the fact that an analysis of race, racism, and power in the American context cannot follow a nationalist framework and should rather take into account the spatial institution which tied the American subalterns together throughout the hemisphere: the plantation. As such, Thomas's work also puts a great emphasis on exploring more contemporary spaces in US American culture that reproduce the same logics as those of the plantation. The mobility of Thomas's protagonist throughout these spaces—not only from Puerto Rico to the continent but across racial and social boundaries in the United States—allows him to find out about a shared history of slavery and racism experienced across almost all of the Americas by different groups of African descent. This social history is determined by what Aníbal Quijano has termed “the coloniality of power” of the hemisphere—a model for power constituted through the colonisation of the Americas where the idea of “race” is central to the economic and social life of the whole hemisphere (“Latin America” 533).

Plantations were common in all the Caribbean islands, the South of the United States, part of Brazil, and the north of Latin America (Glissant 63), and they determined the societal history of the American subalterns, as Antonio Benítez-Rojo explains throughout his theoretical work *The Repeating Island* (1992) (38; 73). He explains that, although the presence of plantations in the Spanish Caribbean entered into decline around the beginning of the 17th century (33-44), thus accounting for these islands' “demographic, economic, and social [differences compared to] the rest of the Caribbean” (62), it was this presence, no matter how shortly-lived, what determined that the whole of the Caribbean is the same “*societal area*” (emphasis in the original; 38), characterized by a series of socio-economic human relations that repeat themselves through time (45; 72). Similarly, as we know, plantations were not present everywhere in the United States, but they are pretty much alive in the social imaginary of African Americans. The question here, once again, is not bounded by national categories. Illustratively, the history of African Americans

may have more to do with Haitians than with the Pilgrim fathers but, unlike in Haiti, their revolution was not led by their equals but by their oppressors. Is then Haitian literature—following Klor de Alva’s logic—postcolonial but African American literature is not? Because of this, it is imperative not to analyze the experience of the subalterns on the sole basis of the national cluster, as it fails to distinguish between the separation of local histories and global designs which decolonial thinker Walter D. Mignolo so intently traces.

Benítez-Rojo explains that even with abolition, independence or socialism, the structures of the plantation—determining economic, racial, and spatial hierarchies (Glissant 63-5)—have managed to repeat themselves through chaotic transformations⁴ (73-4). According to Glissant, the cultures that emerged out of the plantation began their own literary tradition, one which is defined by the discontinuities that ensued with the slaves’ attempts to express themselves in a language that, because of their repression, was deeply symbolic (71). Piri Thomas’s work reflects these transformations in the protagonist’s pilgrimage across different locations in his aim to reach the American South: he explores spaces where these dynamics reproduce themselves within the American coloniality of power but also places of resilience and contestation. Thus, he learns about the shared past of the subalterns with whom he identifies more than with his own family.

Piri’s lack of understanding with his family—and the ensuing lack of affection—reflects the alternative forms of kinship that Gigi Adair, relying on the work of Glissant, contends developed in the plantation (134). Adair demands for a necessary change in the conceptualisation of kinship within cultural analyzes. It was precisely because of the dislocation of African slaves that this alternative affiliation was conformed, uniting those who shared the same conditions of oppression (134). It is also related to colonialism that biological kinship has such a great value in the Americas nowadays. The biological and linear understanding of kinship

⁴ Benítez-Rojo relies on the Theory of Chaos to define the social structure that he ascribes to post-plantation societies. He argues that the socio-economic dynamics that started with plantations irregularly proliferate again from time to time in the Caribbean (he makes reference to planting companies appropriating the best lands once slavery was abolished). On a different note, the cultural reactions against this violence also proliferate in this “certain kind of way” (17; 73).

became consolidated there with the arrival the Europeans. Glissant explores in his book *Poetics of Relation* (1997) the evolution of the Western understanding of the history of humanity, which according to him is linear and chronological⁵ (Glissant 48;51). Filial legitimacy became fixed in the West when nations became rooted in a territory while nomadism entailed conquering those who did not belong to the community (14-18). In these conquests—and ensuing colonisation—the underlying notion was that the root of the conquerors be transplanted into the new territory, taking with them their language and religions (Glissant 14; 50). This belief is therefore also behind “the violent destruction of kinship”—the kinship of the Others—in the practice of slave trade (Adair 2).

Adair invokes the field of “queer diaspora studies” and explains that its contributions are not only relegated to an exploration of sexuality but also engage in reconceptualising the heteronormative biological notion of kinship that pervades the Eurocentric tradition (8; 11-12). For Adair, “queering” means an epistemological contestation to the principles lying behind the logics of nationalism. These principles are, non-coincidentally, those of heteronormativity, since heterosexual lineage stands in line with the linear historical projection of descent that has been explained above (Adair 10). Adair’s concept, therefore, is clearly related to LGBTIQ+ discourses, since “queering” is an attempt to debunk the heteronormative as the only model of thought (9), but her argument is not limited to that. Adair defines as “queer” all subjects that escape the logics of nationalism, in particular diasporic ones, since their displacement and the dissonance between nation and territory enters into conflict with nationalist logics (10). However, Paul Gilroy interestingly explains in *Against Race* (2000) that this understanding of identification as rooted in a territory and arborescent in terms of kinship has been sometimes reproduced in the context of diaspora—what Gilroy expresses as “talk[ing] back to [the] nation-state” (126)—in an attempt to reconstruct “the integrity of the nation” abroad (127). Since Piri’s family, in chromatic terms, ironically does

⁵ Glissant refers to Christianity and natural history evolution to exemplify how within Western epistemology time is linear (think of the conceptualisation of time as before and after Christ or the linear evolution of the species) and destined towards a common destiny. This permeated all the aspects of life and “the power of the principle of linearity” would be retained to justify a history of conquest (49).

not fit into the arborescent logic of filiation—some members of the family are white while others are black—the novel is able to unveil the artificial nature of this model. Through the protagonist's rejection of Puerto Ricanness as his main emotional affiliation in order to embrace black identity, Thomas's novel proposes a postnational framework, which is by extension a challenge to linear kinship. Therefore, the categorisation of this novel as Latino or African American, which would bear a component of linearity too, has not been able to account for these kinds of challenges. The alternative relations that emerged in the plantations as an "extended family" (Glissant 72), though, break away from such rooted notions to engage in more rhizomatic ones, while the pan-American literary model that critics like Glissant propose also accounts better for the heterogeneity of the novel.

David Eng suggests that the understanding of kinship should not be relegated to the biological family (4). In the plantation context of oppression, the new relationships and affiliations that emerged must be considered legitimate kinship in our analyzes if those are meant to surpass the colonial gaze. Particularly in terms of space, "queering" is present in Thomas's novel with the protagonist's gradual exploration of spaces that, though presented as full of violence and devoid of possibilities, also allow for a reconsideration of biological kinship, not as a pre-given natural category but as an ideological construct that perpetuates racist and nativist attitudes. Thomas's novel is set in what I call "queer spaces," spaces where the logics of linear kinship and its consequent assumptions of racial purity are not present. In them, the characters have the possibility of uniting in alternative family networks despite skin colour, nationality, and religion. As a result, these spaces also challenge the logics of nationalism and colonialism by suggesting that affiliation is not linked to territoriality.

QUEER SPACES IN *DOWN THESE MEAN STREETS*

Piri Thomas' *Down These Mean Streets* narrates the growing up process of Piri, a young black boy of Puerto Rican descent who grows up in Harlem during the 1940s. This autobiographical novel begins at the moment when the protagonist and first-person narrator is just a teenager—around thirteen or fourteen years old (Thomas 15)—and

walks around his neighbourhood in Harlem at night expressing the fear of being hit by his father because of being late. But just before that there is a prologue in which Harlem—"my *barrio de noche*" (emphasis in the original; ix)—is celebrated as a heterogeneous landscape where lights, car noises, and music merge. It recalls Glissant's description of the post-plantation places where "the Plantation region, having joined with the endless terrain of haciendas or latifundio, spread thin to end up in mazes of sheet metal and concrete in which our common future takes its chances" (72-3). This is the first stage in Piri's life, when he feels the least alienated if we compare this time with the next locations he inhabits.

Life in Harlem is depicted as really hard in the first chapters, when the family clearly idealises life in Puerto Rico and yearns to move on to a stage with less suffering: the family lives in a crowded and extremely cold apartment where there is no intimacy and the father works at a WPA job in almost inhuman conditions. The apartment and, by extension, the Barrio in which it is situated, are described as sorts of "crisis heterotopias" in the sense that Michel Foucault envisioned them. Heterotopias are, according to Foucault, places which are "in relation with all the other sites" by "represent[ing], contest[ing], and invert[ing] them" (24). Out of the two types of heterotopias which Foucault lists, crisis heterotopias are inhabited by "individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis" (24), like adolescents or pregnant women. I consider Harlem in this novel a crisis heterotopia because it is inhabited by migrant workers who have recently arrived in the US continent (I use this term so as not to imply that Puerto Rico is not part of the United States), but whose objective is to leave these places and move to "better" neighbourhoods, as if this was only a temporary state. However, this place is interestingly presented in the novel as the only hospitable one for Piri.

Piri's time in his first Harlem block proves difficult, but mainly because of the problematic relationship with his father already pointed at. Piri expresses that, compared to the treatment his other siblings—non-coincidentally, white—receive, his father always "*sounds harder and meaner*" when he speaks to him: "*I wonder if it's something I done, or something I am*" (emphasis in the original; 22). After those first three chapters the family moves from the previous Puerto Rican block where "everybody acted, walked, and

talked like [Piri]" (24) to an Italian block in a different street in Harlem. There, the protagonist is bullied and brutally hit by a gang of Italian kids not because of being Puerto Rican, but because of being black. How is this a hospitable site for him then, when the problem of blackness—which pervades the novel—appears here as well? Because an alternative form of association becomes available to Piri as he grows up: a gang in which he is accepted after demonstrating his “rep” (reputation) at a street initiation ritual (50-1). The gang functions like a war machine, as described by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. War machines are defined by their functioning outside all state organisations (352-356). For Deleuze and Guattari, these gangs “are groups of the rhizome type, as opposed to the arborescent type that centers around organs of power”; they are “metamorphoses of a war machine formally distinct from all State apparatuses of their equivalents which are instead what structure centralized societies” (358). Piri’s gang is a means for group self-defence—“Shit, I had been scared, but that was over. I was in; it was *my* block now” (emphasis in the original; 51)—for people who have been abandoned by the administration and public services. Just before talking about the gang, the previous chapter explains how Piri and his mother go to the Home Relief Office. Piri is witness to the kind of treatment that the people, in their majority black and/or Puerto Rican, who are there receive: they are accused of losing their WPA jobs because of being lazy or addicted to alcohol.

This kind of mistrust for state institutions is also represented in the musical film *West Side Story* (1961), one of the first—although problematic—filmic representations of the Nuyorican experience, in turn based on a Broadway musical. In it, the two rival gangs, Puerto Ricans and white Americans (children of European immigrants) namely, would never, despite their enmity, betray each other to the police, who they perceive not even as an enemy but as an entity which they are devoted to ignoring and leaving out of their parallel organisation. There is a scene in the film where the white gang members keep silent as a policeman asks them for information about the other gang. Collaborating with the policeman would have proved useful for the gang’s goal of dominating the territory in their Barrio—“Look, fellas, I’m for you. I want this beat cleaned up and you can do it for me. I’ll even lend a hand if things get rough” (*West Side Story*)—, but they decide not to do it. All the members of the gang keep silent throughout the scene, which does not even establish

a hierarchy within this band's opponents but that the organised state is "of another species, another nature, another origin" (Deleuze and Guattari 352) and they should thus not be mixed. The police is a tool for control employed by the state apparatus according to Deleuze and Guattari (352), an apparatus which wants to "prevent[...] all combat" unless it is institutionalised (353), for which it makes use of "police officers and jailers" (352), and which feels menaced by war machines such as the gang just because their workings contest the nature of state's underlying structures (356). In fact, it is interesting that the policeman's motives in the film are racist, as exemplified by the dialogue quoted above, while the white gang's intentions are only related to street gang dynamics, and they—despite having used racial slur throughout the film—look at the policeman's talk with amazement as he expresses his thoughts.

The gang organisation is, however, not attainable in the Long Island suburb where Piri's family eventually moves once his father "mak[es] good money at the airplane factory" (81). There Piri feels that he is constantly "the only one trying out" (82) and, after trying to become friendly with a girl named Marcia and asking her out for a dance, he feels for the first time the recipient of a sort of hate which has nothing to do with the gang fights in Harlem. After she makes an excuse, Piri hears Marcia talking to a friend, explaining to her that Piri must have had some nerve to ask her out being black and concludes that "[w]e're getting invaded by niggers" (85). Because of this constant racism which his white siblings do not suffer nor denounce, Piri decides to go back to Harlem, where he engages in the business of drug dealing. His siblings's lack of understanding for their brother's situation exposes kinship as a colonial construction. Filiation, as its importance evolved from the Western idea of legitimacy developed through epics as myths in the ancient world, is associated with racial purity: in these ancient texts, what unleashed the tragedy was the "threat of *métissage*" (emphasis in the original; Glissant 50), as in Helen of Troy's abduction. David Eng defines "queer diaspora" in the following terms:

a concept providing new methods of contesting traditional family and kinship structures—of reorganizing national and transnational communities based not on origin, filiation, and genetics but on destination, affiliation, and the assumption of a common set of social practices or political commitments (4)

Similarly, Piri finds a more meaningful relation with his friends Brew and Crutch, with whom he shares a common experience and from whom he learns what this experience means, than with his siblings. Furthermore, the dynamics of these relations are determined by the spaces in which they take place, Harlem being in this case a “queer space” where the power relations that dominate the other spaces do not work.

Blauner explains that while white immigrant groups only live in ghettos for one or two generations before moving to other places, as the logic of the crisis heterotopia suggests, this is not the case with blacks. Blauner offers the explanation that black ghettos function as internal colonies: their businesses are owned by white people and their inhabitants do not participate in their public life and its policy-making (397-8). Piri finds the racism he suffers in Long Island—where he is constantly reminded that he does not belong—more unbearable than the fights between gangs based on “reputation” in Harlem, because the former reflects the sort of state racism whose institutionalisation is, according to Quijano and Wallerstein, a result of the American coloniality of power which determined the ethnic division of labour which operates in the Americas (551). In this case, Piri feels—and is—completely deprived of any sort of agency and control. Although he had previously refused to identify as black, claiming that he was Puerto Rican, after experiencing life in a white neighbourhood and later trying to find a job, he realises that “a lot of things that made sense to any Negro [...] made a lot of sense to me” (120). Piri narrates how selling drugs became easily available to him on his return to Harlem from Long Island (98), but, when trying to obtain another job, he found about the close relationship between racism and labour in the United States: “I opened my mouth to answer and Louie and I knew what was shakin’ at the same fuckin’ time. The difference between me and Louie was he was white” (103). After this realisation, and also after assessing his own former denial, whereby he insisted that he was “no damn Negro and [...] no paddy [but] Puerto Rican” (123), Piri decides that going to the Jim Crow South would “set [him] straight on a lotta things” (127).

In his journey of acquisition of knowledge, in the *bildungsroman* tradition, Piri establishes affiliative connections with those with whom he shares this sort of oppressions—who he feels closer to and understands better than his family: “I was scared of the

whole fucking world. *Brew, baby, you were right, I cried. Where the fuck are you, baby? Damn, man, you're my ace, you're my one brother*" (emphasis in the original; 191). These affiliations are established in spaces which derive from the logics of the plantation where "[w]ithin this universe of domination and oppression, of silent or professed dehumanization, forms of humanity stubbornly persisted" (Glissant 65). Glissant theorised throughout his oeuvre the concept of Relation, a form of contact between cultures which denies their absolute origins (Forbes 7-8), therefore contesting the logics of the nation and racial purity specified above. For Glissant "the Plantation is one of the focal points for the development of present-day modes of Relation" (65), by which "identity is no longer completely within the [biological] root but also in [horizontal] Relation" (18). Interestingly, as was the case with the slaves separated from their families in the plantations, the "present-day modes of Relation" in which Piri engages contest biological kinship too. For him, they sharply contrast with the problematic relationships he has with his family. As expressed in the quote above, Brew is not only a part of Piri's family, but his only "one brother," a realisation expressed after they have gone through the experience of suffering the same practices of discrimination in the South and therefore identifying with the same "cultural practices of resistance", as Agustín Laó-Montes would put it (34).

Identification in terms of chromatics is prone to be criticised as essentialist. In fact, Marta E. Sánchez considers that Brew—from whom Piri learns this identification—is "a dark-skinned African American from Harlem who talks the talk of an angry black nationalist" (117). Nevertheless, this identification is grounded on lived experience rather than essentialist notions of identity, since it is in fact an exploration of the power dynamics that operate around non-white people. As shown in the novel, people of African descent are essentialised by others but their own denial to acknowledge the categories which are imposed upon them perpetuates rather than deconstructs such categorisation, since the discriminations inflicted on its base continue to be in place, unopposed, as Piri suggests to his also black father: "If you're really so sure you're white, come on down South with Brew and me and see where you're really at" (151). Piri's decision takes place at a point in his life when the relationship with his family reaches its worst moment. He finds out that his siblings were making excuses for his appearance, claiming that he

has “Indian blood”, to the white people they met in Babylon (the Long Island neighbourhood), which unleashes a fight between them (146-7). Some chapters later, his father, after much denial and violence towards Piri, finally confesses that it was the hate that he himself had received from white Americans when he arrived on the continent that he had internalised and projected towards his son (153).

In his confession, Piri’s father recounts how some Americans were baffled at his surname, wondering “how come, if [he] was Puerto Rican, [he] had John Thomas for a name” (153), to which he responded that “[his] father was so proud to be an American that he named all his children with fine American names” (153). This conversation, together with the journey south the Mason-Dixie line, completes Piri’s process of acquisition of knowledge about his Caribbean homeland and its interrelationship with the Americas in general with regards to the slavery past which they share. As he explains to his brother José,

“And James is blanco, too?” I asked quietly.

“You’re damn right.”

José flushed the toilet chain so hard it sounded as if somebody’s neck had broken. “Poppa’s the same as you,” he said, avoiding my eyes, “Indian.”

“What kinda Indian?” I said bitterly. “Caribe? Or maybe Borinquén? Say, José, didn’t you know the Negro made the scene in Puerto Rico way back? And when the Spanish spics ran outta Indian coolies, they brought them big blacks from you know where. Poppa’s got moyeto blood. I got it. Sis got it. James got it. And, mah deah brudder, you-all got it! (145)

Despite the linear tones of the conversation in terms of blood and how kin is transmitted, the ironic situation weaved in this novel through the fact that the siblings possess different skin colours encourages a reconsideration of what family is or should be, and suggests that what it is not is due to the racism that is found at the core of biological understandings of kinship, which impedes a positive relationship between these two brothers.

The space of the South also participates in this reconsideration. There everyone who belongs to this plantation past—the Black Atlantic diaspora—is homogenised and treated in the same way:

“Yeah, Brew,” I said, “it must be tough of you Negroes.”

“Wha’ yuh mean, us Negroes? Ain’t yuh includin’ yourself? Hell, you ain’t but a coupla shades lighter’n me, and even if yuh was even lighter’n that, you’d still be a Negro,”
I felt my chest get tighter. I said, “I ain’t no damn Negro and I ain’t no paddy. I’m Puerto Rican.”
“You think that means anything to them James Crow paddies?”
Brew said coolly. (123)

Hence, the constant denial of Piri’s family and their outrage at Piri’s self-definition as black resembles the destruction of kinship which took place at the Middle Passage (Adair 2). This is not to say that all black people should be considered biological kin, but that favouring a traditional understanding of kinship in this novel denies Piri and people in his liminal situation the possibility for the affiliation—rather than filiation—which Eng describes as a poststructuralist understanding of kinship, in the same sense as other well-established institutions have been deconstructed by this school (4). Like the emotional affiliation which emerged in the plantation, the internal organisation of queer spaces, like Harlem, challenges the racism and violence that have been transforming and repeating themselves since the European arrival to the hemisphere (Benítez-Rojo 73-4; Quijano, “Latin America” 567).

Another space fulfils this role in the novel, this time a “deviation heterotopia”, defined by Foucault as a place “in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed” (25): the prison. After coming back from the South, Piri goes back to Harlem determined to never again live in a white neighbourhood and eventually becomes addicted to heroin (200), hooked on “the way out feeling when that good-o smack was making it with you, that nothing in the whole *mundo* world made no difference, nothing—neither paddies nor Poppa and strange other people” (emphasis in the original; 206). Because he needs money to satisfy his addiction, he first decides to deal with drugs (201), but, after several unfortunate events, the most significant one being Piri’s having an unexpected baby, he and his friend Louie, together with some white professional criminals from Newark, plan to raid a night club (228). The “stick-up” does not go as planned and Piri ends up shot and in the hospital, and then in jail because in his attempt to defend himself he shoots a policeman, who finally does not die—the only reason why Piri avoids the electric chair (233-242). The years in prison, although frustrating and alienating for him, expand Piri’s

knowledge because of the forms of relation that emerge in there. One example is the “plenty of talking” in which he engages in prison (258), out of which the narrator delineates a picture which personalises the convicts through the description of their heterogenous and personal stories, counteracting thus the state’s depersonalisation of prisoners. Another example are the ritualistic fights which remind readers of Piri’s teenage gang years: “Sometimes a fight between two men makes them the greatest of friends, because of the respect that is born between the swinging fists” (261). The most significant example, though, is Piri’s becoming familiar with Muslim religion.

In how Muslim religion makes Piri “aware of life and [of] what was inside of [him]” (298) and in how Muhammad—the convict who introduces him to Islam—becomes “his *brother*” (emphasis mine; 294), one can perceive that Piri accesses the multiplicity of the world out of which Glissant builds his theory of Relation: “[i]n Relation the whole is not the finality of its parts: for multiplicity in totality is totally diversity” (192). Muhammad debunks Piri’s initial ethnocentrism by which he associates religion to nationality or to an idea of race. He expresses that “maybe the reason for this jumping of Negroes to become Muslims is on account of maybe Allah is a black man’s god” (291). However, Muhammad teaches him that his religion was born in “the Far East” (*ibid*), much earlier than the emergence of the modern/colonial world system which Piri has in mind when he makes such an assumption based on Eurocentric racism. This is Piri’s contact with the *chaos-monde*, “a world that cannot be reduced, simplified or normalized” according to Glissant (33). This experience, together with his awareness of the mobility of transnational Caribbean-Americans—the circle by which African slaves were taken either to the Caribbean or to the American South in order to be sold, the acquisition of American slaves by the Spaniards, which explains Piri’s surname (Thomas), and the modern economic migration of Caribbeans to urban centres, which had determined the Thomas family lives—makes Piri conclude that the ethnocentrism in terms of nationality by which his family defended their identity does not make any sense in the Americas.

In conclusion, the sort of thought that Édouard Glissant develops associated with the Caribbean—which he reads as “an infinitely varied, dauntingly inexhaustible text” (Dash xi)—proves pertinent in this novel. Thomas’s text thus exposes the presence of

the coloniality of power throughout the hemisphere at the same pace as the characters' understanding of nationality loses relevance throughout the narrative. The colonial space of dehumanisation in terms of racial categories shared throughout the Americas—namely, the plantation—is rewritten in this novel in the shape of the Barrio, the segregated spaces of the South, and the prison. Just as Glissant explained it, despite the dehumanisation inflicted in these places, they are loci of Relation, where the knowledge of the whole ensues; in his words, a knowledge “of totality but willingly renounc[ing] any claims to sum it up or to possess it” (21). These places are microcosms of what Glissant theorised as “the chaos-monde” (94), an aesthetic attempt to contest the colonial obsession with an order—the opposite of chaos—materialised in how they categorised every aspect of the world and the human experience into dehumanised monolithic slots such as race, nationality or culture.

In this sense, Piri Thomas' novel can be read as a postcolonial American text which shows an awareness of the coloniality of power operating in the United States and of how the Modern idea of nationality disguises a broader world order determined by the same racial hierarches that made colonisation possible in ideological terms. As such, what in the novel might seem an essentialisation of “race”—indeed what Marta Caminero-Santangelo has seen as an engagement on the part of the novel in strategic essentialism (206)—serves to stress that 19th century notions of biological racism continue to operate at a social and economic level in the United States in ways so entrenched that it has become naturalised, making its identification as a construction difficult. Rather than reinforcing the categorical separation of the world into races in the same manner that this was done during colonialism to place the conquered “in a natural situation of inferiority to the others” (Quijano, “Latin America” 533), *Down These Mean Streets* offers an anthropological panoramic view at the ways in which colonial racist ideas subtly operate within the foundations of American society and still determine the spaces which the—now internally—colonised occupy. The novel, furthermore, establishes these spaces within the tradition of the plantation by stressing their potential for subverting colonial discourses and ideologies—such as the ones operating around the traditional understanding of kinship—because within these spaces the colonised establish modes of organisation, relation, and kinship

completely different to and, therefore, inapprehensible by the state's colonial logic of power.

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